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COMICS & GAMING

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MAGAZINE



Guacamelee!

Unmasking Toronto's
Drinkbox Studios

STAR TREK

On deck with Paramount's
new game

» INJUSTICE

Insight from creator and
Mortal Kombat icon Ed Boon

GENUINE
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Changing Of The Guard

As 2013 gets into full swing, there are quite a few changes already taking place before we even make the big leap to new consoles. It almost feels like as the next generation begins to dawn upon us, some of the machinery of the current generation is beginning to wind down.

We've seen Nintendo, the once uncontested kings of hardware sales take a drastic and surprising nosedive as the Wii U has failed to ignite interest in the way that the Wii did. We've seen the president of Square Enix announce his resignation after over ten years of service, a response to the astounding losses the company has experienced in the last year alone. And finally, we've said goodbye to LucasArts, a company once famed for both its adventure games and early *Star Wars* titles, now cancelling all in-house development and being relegated to just a licensing arm of the Disney corporation. The landscape of the gaming industry is changing.

And so, it seems, is the way that people will be gaming.

As more information is released about the next generation of consoles, one thing is abundantly clear; both Sony and Microsoft want to shake things up. The PS4—thanks to official announcements—has already made its agenda known; it wants to be a window to both gaming and social networking. Sony wants players to be able to share and communicate with friends quickly and easily. Microsoft's intentions are a little more nebulous, thanks to only rumours circulating from anonymous industry sources, but what's come to light is just as ambitious, if a little troubling. There's still no actual confirmation from Microsoft, but if the current rumours are true, the next Xbox console will require an Internet connection for all gaming activity, even single player games, going so far as to quit out of a game entirely if the internet connection is lost and not re-established within a three minute grace period.

While many view this as anti-consumer, it is very publisher friendly. Such an infrastructure virtually eliminates software piracy, and might even be used to control the playability of used games. It also however, allows for a more complete multimedia experience. With hardware that requires a mandatory internet connection, Microsoft might finally have the holy grail they were chasing after so many years ago; a PC that becomes the most important appliance in the living room. But of course, all of this is still rumor at this point, though it's rumour that's being reaffirmed again and again by multiple sources within the industry.

What's not rumour is Canada's latest indie success, Drinkbox Studios with its newly released game, *Guacamelee!*. The studio itself is a smaller, independent company based in Toronto, and fits right in with other indies that have made a name for themselves in the gaming world while remaining steadfastly at home in Ontario. At CGM, we're always happy to see more Canadian talent enjoying the attention and success they deserve, so we've given some extensive coverage to both the game and the studio that created it. We've also got the usual array of reviews and editorials about the big games, the big comics, and the topics and developments in both media that concern you, the audience.

Wayne Santos

Senior Content Editor





Since *Minecraft* was officially released in November 2011 over 10 million people have hopped on for its, at the time, innovative game mechanics and interesting gameplay. Dan looks at the reason why people keep coming back – the modders.



Seán sits down with Ed Boon and talks about the legacy created by over 20 years of *Mortal Kombat* titles. Ed also takes time to tell us about the release of his latest game *Injustice: Gods Among Us*.



Reid examines what the implication of the PS4's purposed Share button is for gamer players, game developers, and the industry as a whole. Social media has an ever increasing presence in our everyday lives. What does it mean for games?



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A look at the studio behind Guacamelee!

A Plea for the Modern Day RPG

Why won't the West embrace the present

Block by Block

How modding keeps Minecraft alive

The Share Button

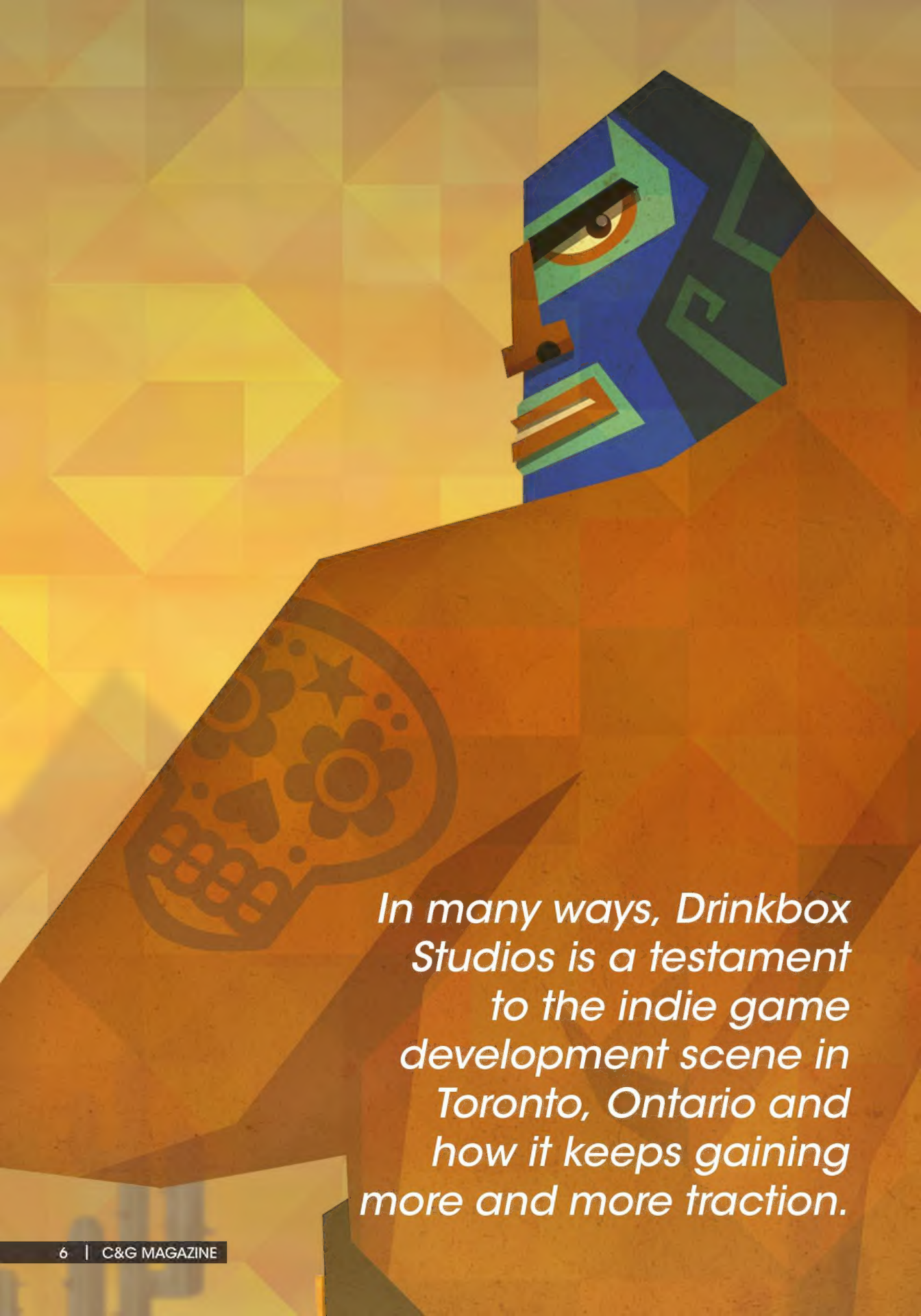
One button to rule them all

The Fall of the 80s Action Hero

The twilight of the 'neon decade's' stars

Kontender

Ed Boon explores 20 years of Mortal Kombat history



In many ways, Drinkbox Studios is a testament to the indie game development scene in Toronto, Ontario and how it keeps gaining more and more traction.

GUACAMELEE!

Local Flavours: the Story of Drinkbox Studios

Words by Wayne Santos



Graham Smith is a busy man. Drinkbox Studios is mere days away from the release of their latest title on the PlayStation Network. The company has gone into full on PR mode, sending staff out to events like the Game Developer's Conference, Penny Arcade Expo East and even promotional tours to court enthusiast press outlets about the game and in the middle of all this, Smith finds time to remember why it is he got into the gaming industry. When asked what some of his favourite games are, he answers, "*Super Metroid*, which I'm playing right now."

Graham Smith is one of the co-founders of Drinkbox Studios, and is the producer on their latest game, *Guacamelee!*; a side-scrolling, brawler/Metroidvania mash up that takes place in a fantastical world of Mexican luchadore wrestling. It's the third full release from the studio and shows just how far they've come in such a short time. In many ways, Drinkbox Studios is a testament to the indie game development scene in Toronto, Ontario and how it keeps gaining more and more traction.

From The Ashes

Graham Smith is a veteran of the Canadian gaming industry that has his roots strictly in Ontario, an impressive feat considering the past difficulties bigger studios have had surviving within the province. He counts both the recently defunct Silicon Knights — and its Xbox 360 exclusive *Too Human* — as well as the defunct Pseudo Interactive on his resume before founding his own studio with fellow members of the Pseudo Interactive team.

"With Pseudo Interactive, the writing was on the wall," Smith recalls. "They'd shrunk down to a very small team, and a few of us started talking about what we'd do afterwards." Of course, with the technology industry in general being so volatile, this wasn't something they could do on a lark. "Starting a company is quite a leap," he said. "It's a scary thing to do. It was myself, Chris Harvey and Ryan MacLean." There was also the network of contacts they'd made with other Pseudo Interactive and ex-Silicon Knights staff who had spread out to other companies around the continent. In short order, they were able to tap those contacts to line up contract programming work, such as sports simulations, and multiplayer network programming on projects like Activision's *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 2*. It wasn't high profile work, but it paid the bills, allowed the burgeoning studio to bring in a few more people and finally set their sights on creating their own game. This led to *Tales from Space: About a Blob*, its Vita successor, *Mutant Blobs Attack* and now *Guacamelee!*. It's also led to a surprisingly amiable relationship with the government for financial support.

Made & Invested In Ontario

Smith has confidence in his team, stressing that even without financial support from the Ontario government, Drinkbox Studios would be productive. However, he's also the first point out that without that extra government support, "The company would be really different if that stuff didn't exist. We would have to have made compromises somewhere." He gives smaller budgets, smaller teams or longer development time as exam-

ples of how the lack of government support would have impacted the creation of their games. Over the course of production, Drinkbox has utilized funding from the Ontario Media Development Corporation and the Canada Media Fund and even Sony's pseudo venture capital initiative, the Pub Fund to assist in paying for the development of their games. And it's not as easy as sticking a hand out to the government and waiting for money to drop. "The Canada Media Fund is a loan, so we have to pay that back," Smith explains. According to him, the CMF funding accounted for about half of the production budget on *Guacamelee!*, but it was far from a sure thing. The CMF has a low percentage of accepting applications and Drinkbox applied multiple times before they were granted funding.

Part of the challenge in securing funding – whether it's from the Canadian government or Sony itself – is convincing the decision makers that a project is worthwhile. In the case of both Sony and the CMF,

both groups are hoping for a return on investment, and even the CMF actually makes informed judgments. "They seem pretty knowledgeable," Smith said. "I don't know who's on the jury, they keep that confidential, so I don't know who it is that's making the decisions. But the people we interact with directly for contract related stuff or deliverables know what's going on. They're looking for innovation. And that's what we highlighted in our game through our multiple pitches."

Making the game is just one part of the battle, however. The other challenge is promotion. For large publishers with massive financial resources like Rockstar or Activision, lavish spending is the norm, even going so far as to fly in journalists to special review events, covering buses and even buildings in advertising for a game, and of course, battering the airwaves with commercials. Indies don't have that kind of budget and so utilize more grassroots – some would say more approachable – solutions. "The dif-

ference between a big company our company is the people who make the game are doing the marketing," Smith says. "I think the journalists like that, they get more of a connection. They know they're not talking to a PR guy. We're also more honest. Sometimes we say things we shouldn't say, and sometimes that gets us into a little bit of trouble, but sometimes we also get good articles out of it."

It's a very different style of game development, compared to traditional "big studio" system that the city of Montreal enjoys with its broad spectrum of companies from Electronic Arts to Ubisoft. But things are different in Toronto, which is primarily a city of indies.

A United Community

For Smith, part of the reason that Drinkbox Studios was formed in Toronto was simply that it was home, and he didn't want to leave it. But beyond that, Toronto offered something that few cities in North America enjoy, and that is a vibrant





indie development scene. With independent developers such as Capybara Games, Metanet, Spooky Squid, Queasy Games and others like Shawn McGrath and Craig “Superbrothers” Adams, there’s an unusually high amount of indie developers that have all had their games well received on PCs, consoles and mobile platforms. Smith realizes it’s different. “Chummy is a good way to say it,” he says. “A lot of these people are long-time friends, and there are events every week. The Hand Eye society is a good example, they often have some pretty good talks, but there are all sorts of little one off events happening all the time. One evening might be videogame music night. There was the long winter event not too long ago where people would show off games they were working on.”

Another reason Smith attributes to the large pool of close knit, indie talent is an infrastructure that has few outlets. “Toronto is a really big city and we have a lot of educational institutions. You have lot of peo-

ple graduating; programmers, artists, and since there’s not a lot of big companies in Toronto, except Ubisoft. And the ones that don’t get in there have might have the skills and ability to release a game on iPhone. You have all these really talented people that love games. They don’t have a place to go. So they do their own thing.”

But just because the indie community is supportive, and it takes less money and manpower to make an indie game, it doesn’t mean the chances of success are any easier. Smith had some words of advice for those looking to make their own games. “It’s not easy,” he said. “Don’t expect to make any money for the first year. And you’ve really got to be careful about keeping things small and doable. If you want to make a company that’s going to survive, sometimes you have to pull back what you’re going to do.”

With three successful games on Sony platforms, it seems like good advice from a studio that knows what it’s doing. **CG**

Just because the indie community is supportive, and it takes less money and manpower to make an indie game, it doesn’t mean the chances of success are any easier.



A PLEA FOR THE MODERN DAY RPG

Contemporary Roles for modern players

Words by Wayne Santos

Developers in the West seem to fear our modern world as a setting for RPGs.



It's one of those things that you don't think about until someone stops and points it out to you. Then when you see that big glaring hole, you wonder how you missed it. The particular omission I'm talking about takes place in the genre of the RPG. And although it's not a complete void, there's a lack occurring here that's not found in other genres. What I'm talking about is RPGs in a contemporary setting. Both RPGs and JRPGs have cornered the market on high fantasy and futuristic settings, but when was the last time you played an RPG that took place in the world you know? In recent years there's only been one company that has been consistently successful about doing this; Atlus with the spin-off titles from their *Shin Megami Tensei* series, the *Persona* series and the *Devil Summoner* series.

The Modern World Is Apparently Japanese

Developers in the West seem to fear our modern world as a setting for RPGs. They adore our times when it comes to first person shooters, action games and even adventure games, but when it comes to RPGs, they get cold feet. There's been only one notable exception to this; Obsidian with their modern spy title, *Alpha Protocol*, a game that failed to make any lasting impression either critically or commercially, thus reinforcing the West's fear of using our everyday world as a place for levelling up and emphasizing plot over action.

Japan on the other hand, and developer Atlus in particular, have wrestled with the idea of a contemporary RPG and enjoyed some notable success. Their big, obvious hit is the *Persona* series, which will be covered later, but first there is the more surprising *Devil Summoner* series. Although the title is a mouthful,

with the full, proper attribution being *Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner: Raidou Kuzunoha vs. The Soulless Army*. This JRPG takes place in what would have to be considered the real world, but in a bold twist, the setting is 1931 Japan. Despite the fact that this is a real world location, it comes off as fantastically exotic since this is a Japan that most in the West are totally unfamiliar with. The 30s was a time of great expansion for the country, though it had yet to take on the militaristic leanings that would characterize the nation later in the decade. Traditional Japan sits uncomfortably with an awareness of the West, of French fashion, and Russian politics. In true noir fashion, the hero of the game works for a detective agency, solving crimes while at the same time utilizing the signature Atlus mechanics of recruiting demons to fight with him and exploiting the elemental weaknesses of his enemies. Despite the fact that the game was never a huge commercial hit for Atlus, this 2006 PS2 release received decent reviews and was widely praised for the originality of its setting. No other RPG has given players a glimpse of a unique world that actually existed not too long ago, seeing streetcars trucking along downtown Tokyo while Japanese female reporters put on their best flapper fashions to get the scoop. There were no magical lands, or distant planets to explore, and yet the very uncommonness of Japan in the 30s made *Devil Summoner* every bit the trip to an exotic world that a traditional genre setting would offer.

In some ways, that very exotic nature would be a 'safe' bet, at least offering to modern gamers a more alien and unfamiliar experience. Where Atlus took some real risks, particularly in its home country of Japan, was to go entirely domestic.

Demon Worlds, High School, Same Thing

Atlus has actually been exploring modern settings in JRPGs for quite some time, as far back as the 90s and the PS1 era in fact. The original *Persona: Revelations* came out in 1996, and carried on from there. However, it wouldn't be until 2006 that gamers outside of a small Atlus niche would finally sit up and take notice. As Atlus moved the *Persona* series under the umbrella of their *Shin Megami Tensei* franchise, they released *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3* for the PS2 in 2006, and completely changed the way people looked at JRPGs. Where previous games in the series had used Japanese high school students as characters, *Persona 3* took the unheard of step of making ordinary student life an actual element of gameplay, rather than something that the characters were rudely ripped out of in order to battle demons.

What sets *Persona 3*—and *Persona 4* apart from past RPGs is the fact that somehow Atlus managed to link everyday situations like studying, hanging out with friends and even joining special interest clubs in school all relevant to traipsing through dungeons killing and recruiting demons. The stroke of brilliance came through in a mechanic known as the Social Link. In true Japanese fashion, one of the main themes of the *Persona* series is that while there can be exceptional people, they accomplish much more when they work with people they trust and respect. The Power Of Friendship™ rears its head again. But here, rather than merely provide the expected fun of watching characters grow together à la BioWare games like *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect*, there are constant, tangible gameplay benefits to nurturing relationships with people and helping them to grow psychologically.

At its most basic level, establishing and maintaining friendships with anyone and developing that Social Link confers bonuses onto the player when it comes time to “fuse”—that is to create—demons to add to the personal collection which are used in combat. More significantly however, by strengthening friendships and helping your immediate allies to self-actualize and grow as people their own “Personas”—or spiritual combatants—gain new abilities and/or grow in power while your companions also gain new abilities in battle such as withstanding mortal blows. In a move that seems completely obvious (and mercenary) in retrospect, Atlus has incentivized maintaining healthy relationships and an active social life by directly translating that effort into perks for demon combat. They even go one step further, taking personal traits like knowledge, courage and understanding and applying them to your ability to cultivate relationships.

All of this translates into an experience that is one half traditional JRPG, with dungeons crawling, random battles, levelling up and conventional mechanics. The other half, however, is an engaging trip back to high school, studying for tests, inviting people for lunches or trips to the movies, and deciding whether to attend

drama club or spend time with the athletic girl in your circle of friends who may be developing a crush on you. No other franchise in gaming has made everyday, 21st century life a vital aspect of advancing the player's RPG experience, and despite the fact that the *Persona* series has shown the rest of the industry how to do it for the last seven years, no other developers have taken up the challenge.

The Future Of Modern Living

Perhaps this kind of trail blazing risk in game design is something we can't rely on the larger publishers to adopt. The AAA game market is, after all, one of appealing to the lowest common denominator in order to ensure the most sales for the massive production budgets such games require. The *Persona* series, on the other hand, is very cheaply made compared to top tier games, and it's because Atlus has treaded in niche audiences with low budget games and they were able to experiment with a setting and design sensibility as bold as that of *Persona*. Even if the concept failed, the loss for them wouldn't have been catastrophic.

That same sense of “I don't have much to lose” pervades the indie development scene in the West. We can't rely on Infinity Ward to make a game that provokes thought and discussion about modern life, but Capybara Games? thatgamecompany? Why not? There is an audience for these games with the critical and modest commercial success of the *Persona* games to prove it. True, both *Alpha Protocol* and the *Persona* series



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There is a world of
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today.

don't play it completely straight; *Alpha Protocol* looked at the world of contemporary spies, while *Persona* grafts its high school simulation on top of a demon hunting/fighting mechanic. But where *Persona* has succeeded to the surprise of everyone is taking the awkward coming of age stories of normal people, with normal dreams and desires, and making their march towards self-enlightenment not just a fun game, but a rewarding one.

If the RPG community is very lucky, Atlus won't enjoy a monopoly on this setting. After all, there's a certain amount of entertainment to be had in the familiar. It's one of the reasons why most romantic comedies aren't set in space or Middle Earth. It's doubtful that BioWare, now firmly in the clutches of Electronic Arts, would ever make this kind of leap, but for anyone that does, there's a whole world of possibility hiding in the world we live in today. That's one of the reasons why *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty* are so popular, so if action games can engage the audience with a modern setting, why can't RPGs?

Atlus has already given us a glimpse into the life of contemporary Japanese teens, while Obsidian's *Alpha Protocol* took us into the world of 21st century spies. But there are other elements to our world, such as crime, romance and mysteries, and even super-heroes that would all fit well in the context of an RPG, Japanese or otherwise. We just need someone other than Atlus to rise up to the task and make that game. **C&G**

Block By Block

Words by Dan Cheer



With nearly 10 million sales to date, *Minecraft* is one of the most successful independently published games of the past decade.

It's not hard to see why. Featuring a cast of cutesy animals, occasionally explosive monsters and boasting a land mass roughly the size of Neptune, almost everything in its virtual world can be manipulated by the player, for the player.





The basic game, as distributed by Mojang, was officially released in November 2011 after approximately two-and-a-half years in development. Created by Markus “Notch” Persson, players spawn in an unfamiliar world comprised of destructible 3D blocks representing terrain, and must survive nocturnal monster invasions by preparing defensive structures and mining for increasingly valuable minerals.

It might not sound particularly addictive, but all new players speak of the massive time sink. The “one more hour” spent carving up the terrain for illicit riches. YouTube features thousands of player-submitted videos showing crazy structural adaptations, from the creation of a full-scale starship Enterprise to the assembly of a functioning 16-bit computer. For particularly talented individuals and novices alike, only the 256-block-high sky is the limit.

And yet, every day, many *Minecraft* players go about their daily exertions completely unaware of the power contained in a parallel world just beyond their reach. This is because the real strength behind *Minecraft* has little to do with Mojang and a lot to do with thousands of dedicated players working behind the scenes to enhance and expand on Mojang’s vision. In short, *Minecraft* now belongs to an extremely active modding community.

Where vanilla *Minecraft* players toil over the land, removing one block at a time with stone-age picks, modified versions of the game allow the construction of huge automated quarries powered by coal, electricity or even nuclear fission. Vanilla gamers may carefully stash diamonds in wooden chests hidden from other players, whereas those who have taken the plunge to a new world create elaborate automated sorting systems with pneumatic pipes and high-capacity storerooms.

For every block created in the base game, there are dozens of new items dreamed up by eager coders keen to push *Minecraft* to the limit. Appearing as individual mods that can be incrementally added to the base game, some are truly transformative and worthy of assessment as an entire game in their own right.

Industrialcraft 2 is perhaps the most widely used and comprehensive modification available now. Adding new ores in the form of copper, tin and uranium, as well as new foliage in rubber trees, *Industrialcraft* aims to move the medieval theme of *Minecraft* several hundred years into the future by allowing widespread automation in mining and harvesting.

Electricity is created by burning coal in a generator, or channelling wind, geothermal, solar or nuclear power along cables to new machines. Electric furnaces can be crafted to quickly smelt ores, as extractors, macerators, compressors and recyclers poke, prod, spin and crush minerals into entirely new forms. Not only that, but most of these machines can be improved with craftable upgrade modules.

Along with new machines, multiplayer objects such as trading mats and personal safes greatly simplify the



Given half a chance and full access to software, modders can create just about any kind of world imaginable.



gifting process online, while teleporters swiftly move players around the world.

Weapons, tools and armour have also been greatly revised. Highly durable sets are made possible by manipulating the new ores, and speciality items such as mining lasers can carve out terrain much faster than before. Jetpacks, too, facilitate quick travel and aid with construction projects.

Commonly installed alongside *Industrialcraft 2*, *Buildcraft* allows the creation of vast quarrying machines that gradually mine down layer by layer, exposing massive swathes of land. Entire dungeons and strongholds can be exposed as blocks removed from the quarry pit are piped to chests, or directly to machines and converted to other blocks on-the-fly. Pumps can be used to drain vast oceans or mighty rivers, allowing terraforming on a scale previously only possible with scores of players working in unison.

Railcraft can be used to create high-speed train networks to move both freight and players around the world, whilst *Redpower* overhauls the traditional redstone network, replacing it with the kind of sophistication found in integrated circuits. There's even *ComputerCraft* which can be used to build visual display units powered by the LUA programming language. It's even possible to play a *Minecraft* version of a text adventure within *Minecraft* itself, proving that given half a chance and full access to software, modders can create just about any kind of world imaginable.

Even the process of installing and configuring each mod has been simplified to assist newcomers. *Tekkit Classic* and *Tekkit Lite* are software packages consisting of popular mods bundled together and designed to coexist and complement each other. Instead of updating each mod individually, the *Tekkit* platform itself can be updated online to a stable version each time new packages are introduced.

None of this would be possible without direct support from Mojang. While *Minecraft* itself isn't actually open-source – that is, the game is not free and cannot be reproduced without permission – Mojang has made available the *Minecraft Coders Pack*; it's a collec-

tion of code designed to allow anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of Java to change pretty much anything they like about the base game provided they don't allow players to circumvent sales.

This model is hardly new. *Counter-Strike*, after all, is a mod for *Half-Life* that eventually became more popular than the title that spawned it. *Counter-Strike* wouldn't have been possible without developer Valve providing mod support, and that goes for *DayZ* (*ArmA II*), *Median XL* (*Diablo II*), *Defence of the Ancients* (*Warcraft III*) and hundreds of others.

Perhaps where *Minecraft* differs somewhat is the scale in which modding has altered the base game. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the changelogs issued by Mojang at each official update. Although creator Notch moved on to other projects following the 2011 release, the game has seen steady improvement under the stewardship of co-developer Jens Bergensten. His updates have generally concentrated on cosmetic enhancements, most of which ably suit the base game yet pale in comparison with the world-changing creations churned out by the modding community.

Mojang may be adept at fixing bugs and introducing new block types every couple of months, but the developer simply can't compete with an entire community of people keen to push *Minecraft* far beyond its original design brief. The same is true of almost all good mods, whether allowing minor improvements or – in the case of *Minecraft* – a complete overhaul to the entire structure of the game, look to the ardent fans with coding experience to produce content far superior to anything the original game design team could envisage.

From a retail and modding perspective, *Minecraft's* future looks bright. Sales continue to climb and it continues to do well in the rather more restrictive environment of Xbox Live. *Minecraft* was always going to be a successful title the second it achieved widespread notoriety, but certainly what prevents it from sliding into obscurity is the encouragement given by its creators to allow anyone to change anything about it they so desire.

It's an attitude many other developers would do well to adopt. **CG**

THE SHARE BUTTON

The Impact of Social Media on Videogames

Words by Reid McCarter



The PlayStation 4 is setting a precedent for videogames to come. A large part of this is due to the fact that it may very well be part of the last round of traditional consoles before companies like Sony and Microsoft begin replacing dedicated videogame platforms with living room boxes (where videogame support is only one check mark in a laundry list of multimedia capabilities). Its early reveal also acts as a foundation for the back and forth one-upmanship that is sure to ensue between those in charge of the major console manufacturers. For these reasons the PS4 occupies an important place in the future of the industry and the medium at large.

This isn't too worrying a thought when it comes to Sony's plans to beef up hardware performance or increase its focus on digital purchases, but other aspects of the system reveal something a bit more distressing: an increased concentration on embedding social media into gameplay experiences.

There is nothing inherently bad about social media. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn and Google+ offer fantastic tools for communicating

with friends, networking with colleagues, keeping up with news or spreading the word about personal projects and events. Whether or not a given person enjoys using social networks in day-to-day life, their potential value is indisputable. It only seems natural that, given the proliferation of social media into every level of the Internet (by the way, please follow me on Twitter and Like C&G on Facebook), it's totally unsurprising that videogames would find ways to integrate the most popular services with consoles.

Sony's PlayStation 4 reveal followed the exact path that industry spectators had foreseen. The upcoming console is primarily meant to play games, sure, but the presentation outlining its features was made up in large part by discussion of how the machine would work to integrate into its owners' social life. The PS4 will be the first truly "social" console. Instead of concentrating on making the kind of multimedia hub that Sony used to specialize in (let's not forget the PSOne's CD player, the PS2's DVD drive and the PS3's Blu-Ray and media server capabilities) the new hardware has been designed with a greater emphasis on sharing. This is evident throughout the key features of the system, from the built-in streaming functionality to the Share

It's one thing to have a Battlefield opponent lob obscenities at your handle; it's quite another to have a threat levelled at your actual name

button that will occupy a prime piece of physical real estate on the redesigned DualShock 4 controller.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing. Many prospective buyers are already active on social media, uploading gameplay videos to Twitch or discussing games on Twitter and Facebook. Making this process more seamless is only catering to the manner by which we now consume media. What is more disconcerting is the manner in which the PlayStation 4 — and, quite likely, competing game consoles — will accomplish this integration.

Privacy, Data and Good Business

According to Sony, the PlayStation 4 will be able to link information from popular social networks to PlayStation Network IDs, bridging the gap between a user's console and social media identities. When I play games on the Internet I use my real first name (because I feel silly making up a nickname and, well, that's the way I've always done it) and have, at times, been discomfited by having even this much of myself exposed to an infinite number of strangers. It's one thing to have a *Battlefield* opponent lob obscenities at your handle; it's quite another to have a threat levelled at your actual name.

What the PS4 proposes is a step further than the relative obscurity of first name handles, though. Most of us use services like Twitter and Facebook under our own legal names. We upload real photos of ourselves, talk publicly with our real friends and sometimes even share where we really work and live with others. The active participation that social networks require helps us to control just how far our lives extend into the public domain, but even the least enthusiastic user can worry, from time to time, about whether or not they've forgotten to check the right privacy box or have sent out a tweet they might regret. Videogame consoles that link with our real identities and default to active monitoring of our leisure time are even more likely to cause privacy-related concerns. Sony has promised anonymity options, but has also made it clear that it plans to make many of the PS4's core network features (video uploading, gameplay spectating) tie in with "real name" PSN IDs. If this isn't handled extremely carefully, the security leaks between trusted Facebook/PSN friends and the barbarian horde of Internet strangers perusing other user's ID pages will fall apart very easily.

Aside from these concerns, it's also worth asking the basic question of what we actually gain from linking



our existing social networks with our game consoles. While it would be nice to easily import the handful of friends who I talk to on Facebook and play online games with, accidentally bombarding other people's feeds with Trophy unlocks or game purchase information isn't something that sounds in any way appealing to me. The PlayStation Network may benefit from aping certain features from other social platforms, but Facebook's tendency to flood user feeds with *Farmville* updates isn't one that is particularly endearing.

This concern extends to the overarching motivation that Sony may have in establishing the PS4 as something of a nascent social network of its own. *Farmville* and *Mafia Wars* status updates may be annoying to a great many people, but they're also incredibly effective advertising. Couple a PSN dashboard filled with the latest news on what friends have been playing with

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the PlayStation 4.

suggested purchase options and it becomes easy to see how potentially lucrative the network can be. This comes together with easily identifiable customer buying/playing metrics to make for an overwhelmingly effective marketing machine. Sony will no doubt make good use of the steady stream of data being broadcast from its users (play habits, purchasing patterns, customer demographics, etc.) to improve its advertising efforts.

The value of data mining (a practice wherein information such as frequently used search engine queries or service usage can be fit into predictive patterns) to modern businesses can't be underestimated. With the re-launch of the PlayStation Network as a social network where customers are constantly engaged in uploading such valuable data, Sony's marketing team are the beneficiaries of the kind of stats they may otherwise have needed to pay third party companies for.



The Share Button is an indicator of the industry to come

Quality Time With Friends

If this doesn't sound alienating enough, it's worth considering how game development is likely to adjust to social media's integration with the PlayStation 4 and other consoles. Faster and more stable wireless Internet connections helped the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 bring online multiplayer features to the forefront of the current generation, something that had a profound effect on the way games are created and played. As social/digital interaction provides an even greater emphasis on multiplayer games, more developers and publishers than ever are likely to push the kind of online features that have made a series like *Call of Duty* such a massive success.

Being able to hop into a quick game of *Black Ops* or *Gears of War* without anyone else being physically present is great, but online multiplayer that excludes any

local play options isn't ideal. The Nintendo Wii, for all its faults, at least inspired real life friends to get together to enjoy videogames rather than meeting up in a digital lobby. Despite the increasing rarity of games that allow for it, certain PS3 and 360 titles also provided similar opportunities. Already, though, we can see the real-world interactions that games like *Wii Sports*, *Rock Band*, *Halo CE* and *Street Fighter* inspired fading into memory, supplanted by digital co-op and multiplayer deathmatches without offline modes. This move from local to online multiplayer is in no small part encouraged by improved access to broadband Internet and the massive success of multiplayer-focused shooting games. The general lack of videogames offering offline play modes is already becoming noticeable and will only become more apparent with the launch of social media enabled consoles.



There's no way to predict whether these changes will be for better or worse, but one thing is for sure: the Share button is much more than a plastic bump on a revised gamepad.

Destiny, Bungie's *Halo* successor, epitomizes the approach that we can expect mainstream videogames to take in years to come. Massively multiplayer, designed with both infinitely playable competitive and cooperative multiplayer firmly in mind, *Destiny* is a videogame that is meant to engage its players in a way that few console videogames do. The endless nature of the shooter makes online-only play nearly mandatory and encourages everyone who owns the game to help Bungie with ancillary marketing. The Share button aids *Destiny* in becoming a highly recognizable name. Players will share exploits — daring co-op missions or particularly spectacular multiplayer kill streaks — on their dashboards, tying in the streaming video features that the PS4 offers to create the kind of organic buzz that will outstrip even the most effective Bungie-created ads.

Being able to instantly upload and share videos may not be something I find particularly appealing, but it would be narrow-minded to disregard just how enticing this feature will be to others. A friend who obsessively plays *Call of Duty* multiplayer loves tinkering around with the in-game replay editor to craft highlight reels from impressive matches. There are also those who populate services like Twitch, watching or streaming live footage from *World of Warcraft* or *League of Legends* for hours on end. Allowing users to bypass video capture kits and make their own gameplay channels with the PlayStation 4's built-in social media and streaming media capabilities will give popular games a massive boost in visibility. Savvy developers will rush

to create the kind of games that best exploit the new console's social tendencies; profit-minded publishers will demand the inclusion of features that take advantage of this type of marketing. Even if it means the end of offline gameplay and real-world socialization.

It's been said before, by sociologists and stand-up comics alike, that our collective embrace of social media has had the ironic effect of dampening human relationships. We're all familiar with the guy at the party who barely looks up from his phone, ignoring immediate interaction in favour of texts, tweets and status updates from other friends. The PlayStation 4 and, I'd assume, the next Xbox have been developed with this type of person in mind.

The coming console generation, despite offering fewer advancements in audiovisual presentation, is likely to significantly change videogames in ways that speculation can only attempt to describe. The way we experience videogames will be fundamentally altered by Sony's focus on social media. Those gameplay, purchasing and marketing realities that we currently take for granted are in for a profound change that will not become fully apparent until, perhaps, a decade of hindsight allows us to see just how different the past — our present — looks in comparison.

There's no way to predict whether these changes will be for better or worse (that will be determined by individual tastes), but one thing is for sure: the Share button is much more than a plastic bump on a revised gamepad.

It's an indicator of the shape of games to come. **C&G**

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THE FALL OF THE 80s ACTION HERO

HOW SUPERHEROES KILLED THE STEROID STARS

Words by Phil Brown



They were once titans of the silver screen. They didn't even need first names to sell tickets. If surnames like Schwarzenegger, Stallone, Willis, Van Damme, Russell, Gibson, or Segal were on the top of the poster, audiences knew that violence and joy was to follow. They got so big that when one of them ran for governor, it didn't even seem that strange. Sure there were questions from rational thinkers, but for the most part the world just quietly accepted Arnie's leadership. Yet, somehow all these years later it takes the entire group pulling together their collective star power to turn *The Expendables* into a modest hit. It's a sad state of affairs when the stars who paved the way for the summer blockbuster era have been edged out by their super-powered children. At the moment all of those big names are attempting comebacks and they certainly deserve another shot in the Planet Hollywood spotlight. Whether or not that will happen... well that's another story.

Action movies have been a popular genre from the days of the matinee serials and the genre morphed over the years through westerns, war movies, sci-fi, Clint Eastwood cynicism, Sam Peckinpah slow-mo nihilism, and Spielberg/Lucas fantasy before falling into the hands of the steroid-infused 80s beefcakes. The intent of these movies was initially serious as in *Rambo's* damaged war vet in *First Blood*, Schwarzenegger's time-



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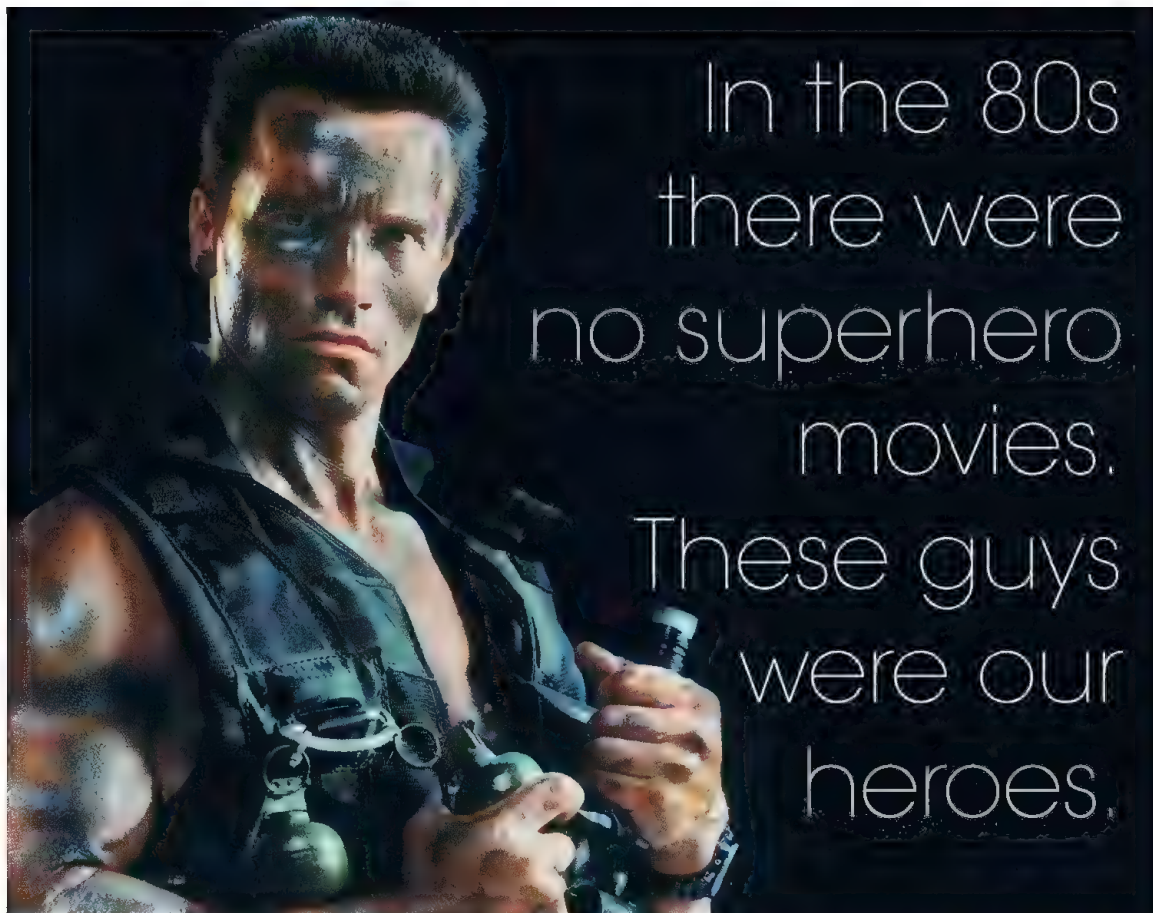


traveling robot slasher in *The Terminator*, Kurt Russell's futuristic anti-hero Snake in *Escape From New York*, or Mel Gibson's gearhead apocalypse in *The Road Warrior*. Sure, there were one-liners as well as slick n' sick displays of R-rated violence that demanded self-defensive giggles, but the tones were fairly somber compared to what followed. They were, at least theoretically, movies for adults that only got embraced by children once the magical VCR came along and parents didn't notice what the kids were watching.

Those initial action hits may have been successful in theatres, but on video they exploded. Suddenly, these walking killing machines were beloved by kids of all ages and they became the new stars of tinsel town. They were either muscle men with speech impediments (Stallone, Arnie, Van Damme) or flippant pretty boys with a taste for comedy (Russell, Gibson, Willis). One thing connected them all: they tended to kill a couple hundred bad guys per movie and crack wise about it. Immature? Sure, but this was also the era of *GI Joe* and *He-Man* action figures, not to mention toy machine guns that looked like the real thing. Little boys always enjoy violence, but this decade was particularly bloodthirsty and with video giving kids instant access to R-rated content, dumb action movies exploded.

When these actors' names started greenlighting projects, the tone of the movies shifted as all of their cocaine Hollywood fantasies came true. So you get flicks like Schwarzenegger's *Commando* in which he played a human being who could lift phone booth with a person inside over his head without breaking a sweat. Or Stallone's *Cobra* in which he played a renegade cop who wore only leather, shot every bad guy without warning, and lived in an apartment framed by a Pepsi logo. These movies had no realism, just star-powered ego and explosions. On the less absurd side of the spectrum was Mel Gibson's *Lethal Weapon* movies in which he played a mulleted suicidal cop willing to do anything it took to get the bad guy (especially Gary Busey) or Bruce Willis coming out of TV comedy to star in *Die Hard*. In these movies, character comedy was as important as bad ass-itude. The posters were just the faces of the stars holding a weapon. That's what the kids wanted: "That guy I like and violence." There was no attempt at social commentary like *Escape From New York* or *The Road Warrior* or even references to classic mythology like *Conan*. Even when those movies got sequels off their star's fame, the tones were lighter and pulpier. By the time the second round of stars like Jean Claude Van Damme and Dolph Lundgren came along, acting ability didn't even matter any more. You just had to look cool and kick ass.

The reason these movies appealed so much to kids is as simple as that, but there's also something deeper. As George Lucas so wisely predicted with *Star Wars*, children are always seeking a new form of fantasy escapism from cinema. The *Star Wars* and *Superman* movies



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made Scrooge McDuck-sized money piles by offering comic book fantasy on the big screen for the first time since the 40s and thanks to the advancements of special effects, the audience exploded. Studios couldn't quite figure out a business model for how to recapture that magic just yet since it required immense imagination and creativity. So it was these larger than life action stars who filled that void. Arnold Schwarzenegger looked and behaved like an action figure, while Mad Max or Snake Plissken could have easily been comic book characters if the movies hadn't made them first. In the 80s there were no superhero movies. These guys were our superheroes and even comic book characters who resembled them like the Punisher exploded in popularity as a result (plus action franchises like *The Terminator* and *Robocop* spawned popular comics). The real turning point came in 1989 with Tim Burton's *Batman*. Suddenly the tiny Michael Keaton could be visually imposing. Thanks to a rubber suit and a talented actor could play a credible superhero regardless of physical attributes. The film made more money than anything by the 80s action stars by dialing directly into the target audience's childhood fantasies. The end was near, but it took about a decade for everyone else to catch up to Burton's unique visual sense.

There were attempts to make further comic book movies in the early 90s, but they were almost all failures since projects like 1990's *Captain America* didn't have the budget or ingenuity to beat Burton at his game. The action stars were still kings, but then a little thing called CGI came along. In *Terminator 2*, suddenly the relatively tiny Robert Patrick could beat the crap out of Schwarzenegger thanks to some CGI enhanced superpowers. Action movies like *Con Air* started to take on more elastic realities with music video and commercial directors providing candy coloured visuals that looked more and more like comic books. The kids didn't need larger than life figures to carry their fantasies anymore and their power started to slip. The turning point probably came with *Blade* in 1998, a comic book movie that bridged the gap with the classic action movie arena thanks to having Wesley Snipes in the title role. It was an unexpected hit and the first to come out of a Marvel Comics property. X-Men and Spider-Man soon followed, each proving far more successful than anything an action star could pull off given that the appeal of childhood icons from cartoons and comics is far more powerful than the latest member of the superstar of the month club. When CGI reached the point where Marvel characters could be brought to life on screen, every-

thing changed. Marvel heroes more fallible and relatable than any action icons or even DC gods. They also made better toys.

Some of the action stars tried to join comic book franchises, but it never worked. Seeing Stallone as Judge Dredd or Schwarzenegger as Mr. Freeze just felt ridiculous. The comic book era required actors who fit their iconic roles and the special effects guys could make their ass-kicking more believable. By the early 2000s all of the 80s action stars disappeared. Technology and shifting audience tastes (as well as viral video racism) made these guys obsolete. However, nostalgia can make any forgotten idols seem cool again. Sly Stallone rode the nostalgia train on *Rocky* and *Rambo* reruns before inviting all his buddies to the party in *The Expendables*. Cool idea, the trouble is that the audience needed for box-office busting success has no sense of nostalgia yet. To kids, these guys are as outdated as John Wayne or Cary Grant. The saddest part is that every star cranked out at least one nostalgia-driven action movie as good as their classic work, but they all failed: Arnie's *The Last Stand* was a glorious action cartoon that only made \$12 million; Russell was damn entertaining in *Grindhouse*, but no one showed up; Stallone's elderly crack at *Rambo* was arguably the best entry in the franchise despite making the least; Gibson's *Get The Gringo* was a lunatic good time that didn't play in theaters, and even the most recent *Universal Soldier* movie was easily the best chapter in that franchise despite going direct to DVD.

These movies all reached and were appreciated by their target audience, unfortunately that audience are all overgrown adolescents clinging fondly to their youth. They can't beat the kids in sheer ticket buying numbers and the old action stars appear to be going the way of the dinosaur. Sadly, in an era when Toby McGuire can flip-kick the Green Goblin or Keanu Reeves can learn wire-fu, watching Schwarzenegger struggle to deliver dialogue with a cigar his mouth and a machine gun in his hand doesn't have the same universal appeal. There have been new action stars in the 2000s like Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson or Jason Statham, but their movies are practically box office failures compared to *The Avengers'* godly numbers. There's a chance these guys can come back if they go back to their roots and revive something like *Escape From New York*, *The Terminator* or *Mad Max* that has a strong narrative comic book appeal with special effects potential. However, it's more likely those movies will just be remade with new "puny girly men," to steal a phrase. Hopefully these guys can still keep working with the support of all us nostalgics, but sadly we have to assume their time as kings has passed. Costumes sell blockbusters now, not names. But maybe some day that will change.

That one guy does keep insisting he'll be back after all... **C&G**





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KOMMUNITY

Ed Boon's 20 Year Balancing Act at the Reins of Mortal Kombat

Words by Sean O'Sullivan



It could be argued that the *Mortal Kombat* franchise caught on because of its gory gimmicks in an era that wasn't prepared for the way it pushed the envelope. However it gained an initial mindshare, and the series has persisted for over 20 years; We caught up with Ed during a recent Toronto visit to promote his latest game, *Injustice: Gods Among Us*, and picked his brain about the evolution of the fighting genre from its quarter-gobbling inception.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: This is your second time working with DC Comics. Were there any experiences that benefited in the development of *Injustice*?

Ed Boon: The main lesson I think that we had is to work as collaboratively as possible. The last time we worked with DC, we dealt with a different group of people, and it was constant 'what do you think of this? What do you think of that?' questions, as opposed to more of a collaborative approach. "Let's come up with something really cool for Superman, Flash, Shazam, or whoever." This group of guys - Jeff Johns in particular, the creative director - have been amazing collaborators from the standpoint of offering up suggestions.

CGM: Was it always conceived of as a one-on-one fighting game?

EB: *Mortal Kombat vs DC Universe* was a fighting game, and it seems to be the one genre that lets us use as many of the cast as possible in starring roles. An adventure game would have to star one of the characters, and the other ones would play a secondary role. *Batman: Arkham City* and those adventures were great games, but we wanted to work with an ensemble cast and feature them equally.

CGM: *Injustice* is clearly informed by the recent 2D style *Mortal Kombat* - are there any kinds of experiments that you've hit upon with *Injustice* that will find their way into the next *Mortal Kombat*?

EB: Yeah - y'know what? I was really pleased with how a lot of players have embraced the background interaction, so that'd be a really fun thing to further explore. Also, the individual power moves - there's a button that's dedicated to a specific power that only that character has. I really feel that worked out great. That's another thing I think we can do. This has been a great learning experience for trying out new approaches.



CGM: Are there any fundamental concepts that you toyed with that ended up on the cutting-room floor?

EB: Every game has something major that gets cut! We currently have the ability to hit somebody into the background and they can bounce off an object and you can continue a combo. Our original intention was to have that possible anywhere - so you could hit someone into any single background object, but it was too restrictive - everything had to be available to be bounced off - and when the game became a bounce-fest, we decided to reduce the scope of that.

CGM: With the MK franchise, you've tackled various fighting game styles: 2D side-scrolling, 3D beat-em-up, would you ever consider a 4-player platform brawler a-la Smash Bros?

EB: Yes, we would consider it. We don't have plans in the immediate future or anything like that. We talked about that every once in a while. But those games tend to skew younger, and I don't know how many older players would want to do all these kind of, extreme things in that context.

CGM: Speaking of older players - do you miss the days of the 90s arcade heyday where you could torment players with cryptic messages?

EB: Yes, and I'm desperately clinging to that as I try to do things on Twitter, and all that stuff of the same vein. That's where that lives on.

CGM: Do you have any favourite rumours about the games you've worked on?

EB: There were a number of rumours that we tried to make real. Ermac - which was a thing in *Mortal Kombat II*, was something for myself to look at how many times a certain programming event occurred, and everybody was wondering if that was a character. So we made him a character! And Animalities never existed until somebody made it up, so we turned it into reality. We loved that interaction with players.

CGM: Is game development more or less fun now that it's such big business?

EB: It's totally different. Y'know - the first *Mortal Kombat* was made by four people. *Injustice* is about 150 people, so it's a different animal. I don't write code any-



more! I used to be the only programmer, but there's no time for that now. It's still fun though – we get to do big launch events like this where people make a big deal out of new games, so it's always fun.

CGM: The fighting game community has really improved its visibility and influence in recent years – how much of a focus is appealing to this powerful niche?

EB: It's a huge focus. You know, the reality is that most people aren't really great fighting game players, like people who want to go to these tournaments, and EVO. But they are the most vocal players who champion your games, so we really want to accommodate what they want to see in a fighting game while also keeping it as accessible as possible, so anyone walking up to the game can start playing and have fun right off the bat. Within our team, we're in a constant balancing act of putting in features that fighting game people can dissect and really get into that aren't necessarily accessible to all players.

CGM: How is it making games in the Twitter era? Anyone can mouth off at you, or on the other hand, give you props?

EB: You have to develop a thick skin, a sense of humour, and not take things too seriously. I think there's a ton of great feedback that you get, but y'know - the bigger the size of the audience, the bigger chance that there's going to be troublemakers in there! So you just take it in stride, that's all.

CGM: The continued longevity of Mortal Kombat is rare in this industry. Why do you think it endures 22 years later?

EB: My feeling is that one of the things that's helped us stay in the limelight is that we're not afraid to add new things to the game. *Mortal Kombat 5* plays nothing like *MK 1* or *MK 9*. Each one of them has been a dramatically different thing. *Injustice* plays completely different - we're just not afraid to dramatically change things.

CGM: You've voiced Scorpion in every single game. Do you ever consider that generations of gamers have been imitating your vocals?

EB: It's funny, I guess! I certainly don't take it seriously, it's just a few lines, and it's, y'know - funny that people point it out to me too. They ask me to say it in interviews and I never do - it's always embarrassing to yell it out loud, but I never do!

CGM: Is it more gratifying building your own characters, or working with properties?

EB: I don't know if any one of them is more gratifying. I grew up reading these comic books. Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, Flash. These things were a huge part of my growing up, I remember as a kid seeing the first Superman movie, the first Batman movies. Those are huge parts of my life. That's a dream come true in that respect. On the other side, making characters in games that people grew up with, like *Mortal Kombat* is also very satisfying. I don't think any one of them is better than the other, but making *Injustice* is a dream come true for me. **C&G**

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Developer Ragnar Tørnquist talks about continuing The Longest Journey



Set Phasers To Stun

An Interview with Brian Miller of Paramount Pictures

Words by Kevin Hamilton



Want a good *Star Trek* game? Historically, it's about as likely as beating the Kobayashi Maru.

Yes, at first blush, this year's *Star Trek* game seems doomed to fail. It's a videogame based on a movie based on a campy TV show from the 1960s. Its original source material typically rewarded protracted diplomacy and scientific know-how over a quick trigger finger. And it pits players against one of the most laughable rubber-suit monsters in sci-fi history: the Gorn.

But the more you look into the game, the less absurd it seems. Director J.J. Abrams succeeded in reinventing *Star Trek* as a modern action franchise back in 2009, and the whole band's back together for the game. The entire main cast lent their voices, the film's composer produced the score and the story is even designed to be canon, produced in concert with the screenwriters.

An uncommon amount of money and talent has been put toward ensuring *Star Trek* isn't just another hollow cash-in. Whether that's enough to overcome the obvious pitfalls remains to be seen. Brian Miller, senior vice-president at Paramount Pictures, tells us how the team adapted talky-and-techy into run-and-gun, built the Gorn up from nothing and tried to avoid the three main shortcomings of movie-based games.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: Traditionally, *Star Trek* isn't the first franchise people think of when you say "action." In what ways did the technology and style of the rebooted *Star Trek* fit the action game genre, and in what ways did you have to compromise between gameplay and established lore?

Brian Miller: Obviously we discussed that at length when we were making this game, but also in everything we do here at the studio when it comes to the brand and trying to be faithful to Gene Roddenberry's amazing vision. But we also tried to find a way to connect a little more emotionally and viscerally with our new audience, whether it's in gaming or in film.

We sat down and looked at not only every *Star Trek* game that's ever been made but also every film that has been done. We wanted to find that nice middle ground with the game — exploration, discovery, going to new planets and telling a great story were obviously our most important goals. But we were nicely reminded of the fact that *Star Trek* has some of the biggest action scenes in any film franchise, particularly with the 2009 film.



We wanted something that was really action-oriented but we also wanted something that was true to *Star Trek* and wasn't just a 15-hour game where you're running around shooting a bunch of lizards.

I think we've found a really nice balance. We had the ability to put the tricorder into the game — which is innate to what *Star Trek* is — that lets you scan and learn about the environment around you. That's opposed to, "Hey there's some bad guys on a ship. Let's go shoot them down, *Call of Duty*-style."

CGM: So what about the weapons? The phaser most fans know fires a single slow-moving beam, which wouldn't work in an action game.

BM: That's exactly what Chris Pine told us when we started showing him the game and doing some of our early recording: "Oh thank god, there's some news guns!" The phaser's great, but it's this little tiny thing. It's really nice to have rifles and grenades that you know Star Fleet have somewhere in their arsenal but have never been shown. In a game like this, that phaser will only get you so far. We had a great opportunity to create Vulcan weapons, but we also had an opportunity to make enemy weapons. We have a whole range of Gorn stuff.

We took it back to what was truly, authentically *Star Trek*. You had a gun that had two settings: stun and kill. Because of the dual nature of the gun, because we're

Whether making games, movies, TV shows, or writing, it's hard not to be influenced by what's out there and to find a way to make it truly unique.



making a co-op game and because Kirk and Spock are two halves of the same personality, we wanted to make sure every weapon has two functions. If you've got your captain's phaser, you've got stun and kill. If you're using a rifle, that might have a bigger energy blast or shoot grenades or shoot out a shield to protect you.

CGM: What exactly is the purpose of the stun setting in the game?

BM: There are two reasons why stun is worthwhile. One is we have some great finishing moves, if you need to sneak around the room and take a Gorn out quietly.

But we also wanted to make it part of the story. We have this moment where Kirk and Spock are called down to New Vulcan, and the Gorn appear through a rift and attack. Being lizards, we wanted to take some queues from the real animal kingdom, so they have venom in them that makes whomever they infect zombie-like. There are less than 10,000 Vulcans left in the universe after the last film, and every Vulcan life is precious. We encourage players to use the stun setting to take them down.

CGM: About the Gorn: can you explain why they were at the top of your list for the antagonists?

BM: It's funny; the Gorn were in one episode. It's a testament to that old show that, to this day, people still

talk about that crazy scene. If you go to Google and look up that fight scene, you'll get things like, "worst fight scene ever" or people gushing over the nostalgia of that silly, silly show. People show up to conventions as the Gorn. We knew that there was something there.

We had the opportunity to update them for the gaming space. Were we ever going to get to a movie that featured the Gorn? Probably not. We were not going to get to the point where those lizards were emotional enough to play against our crew. But they seemed absolutely perfect for our game. It gave us the opportunity to take this legendary, beloved, cliché rubber-suit guy and put them into this new rebooted universe.

CGM: So what about the Gorn's abilities and culture? All of that had to be invented.

BM: We looked at the old episode "Arena" very closely. There was an outpost in the middle of nowhere that got attacked by the Gorn. Kirk and team arrive and see that they've wasted this outpost. We learn at the end of the episode that maybe the Gorn weren't the instigator of the whole thing, and maybe Star Fleet infringed upon their land.

We took that land-based conflict and tried to infuse that into the Gorn. If they were based on a Roman legion, they could be marching across the world, trying to place their flag wherever they could to increase the dominance of their race.

We've got the lowest end, called the Rushers, which are very animalistic: they run on all fours, they don't carry weapons, they jump on you and try to rip your face off. Then there's the initiates, which are the ground troops. We have Brutes, which are more like gladiators. We have lieutenants. We have our commander, who is probably about 12 feet tall. We also have female Gorn, because clearly there have to be females in there.

CGM: How did other third-person sci-fi games, like *Mass Effect* or *Dead Space*, influence the project, and what other properties does the game borrow from?

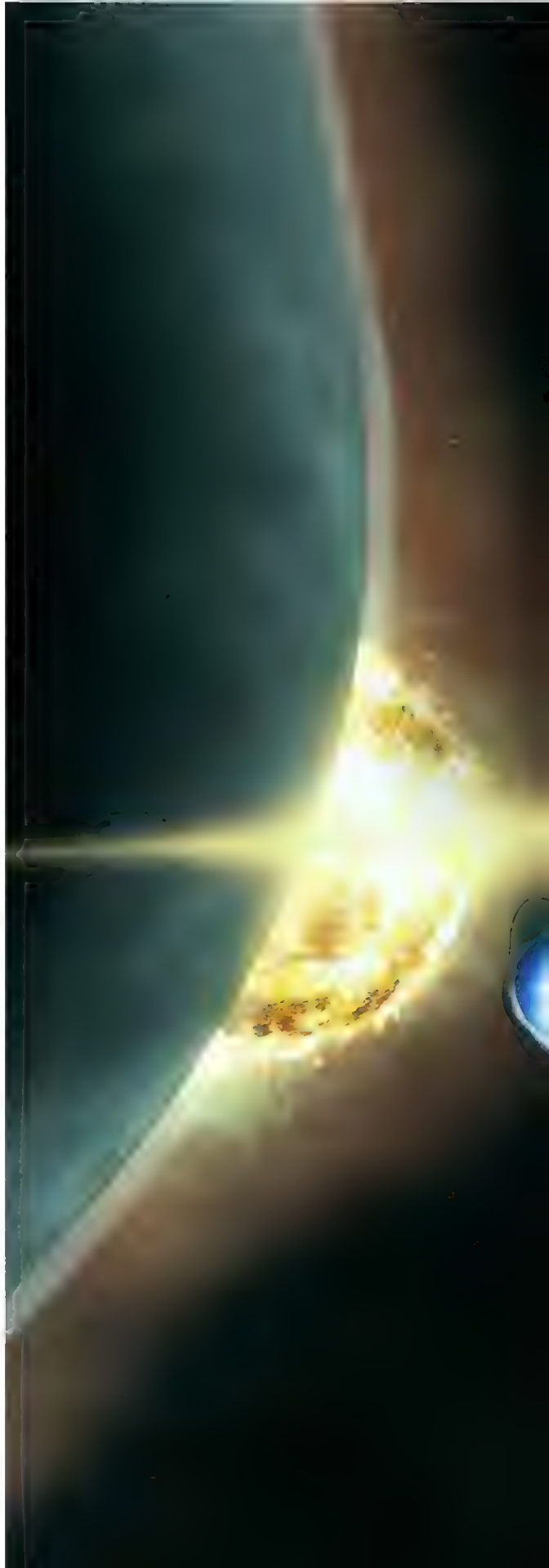
BM: You know, it's hard not to be influenced. We're gamers; we play all the same games you guys do. Not only did we look at all the *Star Trek* games that have been done in the past, but we play *Uncharted*, we play *Dead Space* and *Arkham [Asylum]* and *Mass Effect*. You look at something like *Uncharted*, which has been just a masterclass in storytelling in a game. It's not just running around and collecting treasure. They've really done a great job creating a memorable character in Drake. And *Mass Effect*, with its huge universe — the mind-blowing things they've done in that game! And down to what *Arkham* does, which is tell a very contained but very cool story. We looked at *Gears of War*, which we love from the combat side. *Halo* is pretty fantastic with what they do story-wise.

I think anybody that does this for a living, whether it's making games or making movies or TV shows or writing, it's hard not to be influenced by what's out there and to find a way to make it truly unique. How do we make it feel like it belongs in our universe, instead of, "Oh, that's what they did. They stole detective mode [from *Arkham Asylum*]"? Which is interesting, because in our game our tricorder kind of works like detective mode, but I like to say our tricorder beat detective mode by about 40 years.

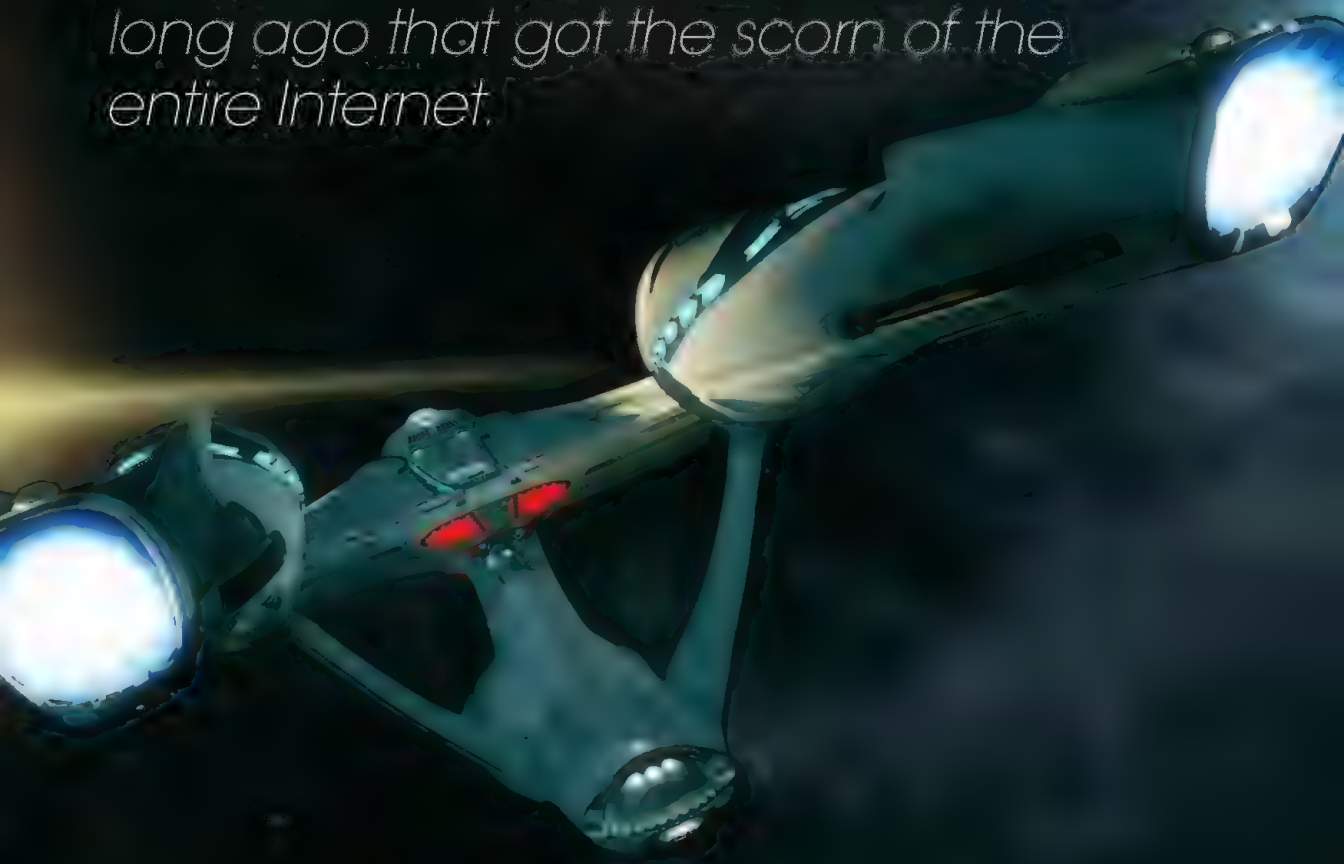
CGM: What did you learn from previous *Star Trek* games?

BM: There have been a lot of different games, whether it's *Klingon Academy* or the *25th Anniversary* game or space simulators or you're coming up as a red-shirt. Some have worked better than others. There are some games where you're just sitting on the bridge of the Enterprise the entire time, and while not as captivating for myself as it could have been — those aren't really the types of games that I marvel at — we knew we had to have moments where you could play as the Enterprise and have space combat.

We were just really shocked to learn that no one had ever made a game where you play as Kirk and Spock — certainly not using the talent from the films in the way that we did — or that tried to create a compelling story that was really canon.



Frankly, I'm the type of guy that's always cautious of movie-based games. There was one game that came out not too long ago that got the scorn of the entire Internet.



CGM: You've talked about how for you, *Star Trek* has always been about Kirk and Spock – that's why making a co-op game was logical. Why do you feel that way, when *Star Trek* is many different things to different people?

BM: I think if you go back and look at the success of *Trek*, it's always been about this great optimistic future, it's about learning and discovery. I think *Star Trek* was a big turning point, where it wasn't about invasions or shooting. I think that if you look at that, there has to be a human approach to it. There has to be a way for audiences to connect. What was so great about that show is that they had a way in through Kirk. People could look at this character and see themselves as this very human, very fallible character. His antithesis would be Spock, who is very logical and doesn't normally do what Kirk would do because that's not the way he's been programmed.

I think if you boil it down to its basics, even with our 2009 film, it's really a study of the friendship and working relationship between a kid trying to live in his amazing father's footsteps and a character who's trying to find his own identity in a culture where he's split down the middle. I think we can see ourselves in both of those people.

CGM: What's something you can tell readers to convince them that this is not just another movie-based game, that you got it right this time?

BM: Frankly, I'm the type of guy that's always cautious of movie-based games. There was one game that came out not too long ago that got the scorn of the entire Internet.

CGM: Are you talking about *Aliens: Colonial Marines*?

BM: You said it, I didn't [laughs]. It certainly got hit in the reviews with not feeling like it was part of the franchise. It didn't feel like an *Aliens* game. The best compliment we've got across the board is that it feels like *Star Trek*. And that is the hardest thing to pull off. It's more than, "Hey, that looks like Chris Pine," or, "Hey,

the bridge looks right." It has to *feel* like *Star Trek*, and that's what we put all of our energy into, from the writing to the music, and to the actors.

If you look at the three things that always plague movie-based games, one is that they're always rushed into production. We've had three years for this game, and hopefully that tells your readers of the importance this game has for us as a studio. Normally, you'll get a call from a company that wants to pay you a lot of money and you're lucky if you get 12 months. And that's not enough time, particularly when you're in production on a movie, to give them assets they may need or to get approvals done, so the game unfortunately suffers.

The second thing is the resources. A lot of these games are considered to be merchandise, something we can sell to rabid fan bases. In the case of *Star Trek*, we know that fans will buy *Star Trek* things, even if they're not the best quality. We think that's a really terrible way to treat a fan. We wanted to make sure this game was funded to be a AAA game. That meant we needed to do it ourselves. This game has a budget that rivals some of the films we make here.

The third thing is not working with the right people. We were very careful to make sure we not only had a good co-publisher and a developer that had the same passion that we did and the right creative team to pull it off, but to also work with the entire studio system here. We have a relationship with the filmmakers and got them to collaborate and make sure our story worked and got the actors involved, which is something that only we could do.

Time, money and creativity, and we think we have those three working for us. **C&G**



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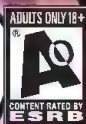
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Juri P
Lakeside, CA



ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE
RATING BOARD



The background of the page is a vibrant, stylized illustration from the game Guacamelee!. It features a large, blue, blocky character with a wide, toothy grin and a red nose, wearing a red sombrero with a yellow band. The character is set against a backdrop of a colorful, abstract landscape with a large, orange, blocky structure and a small, red, blocky character in the upper left corner. The overall style is reminiscent of the game's art direction, with bold colors and a playful, blocky aesthetic.

Luchadorable

How Drinkbox Studios Wrestled to Make Guacamelee!

Words by Rakush

Sarkari

It was a cold February day, when I walked into the building where Drinkbox Studios reside.

Over five years, the studio has helped raise the bar for independent game developers in Toronto. With their latest project, the company is looking to raise the bar for themselves, but also have fun doing it.

I took a few minutes that afternoon to speak with Drinkbox Studios and share the story of how 18 people, in some way, helped created their latest title, *Guacamelee!*.



It's a studio loft in a Richmond St. building in downtown Toronto. The clouds were covering any sunlight outside, and so only a dim light shone through the windows in the front of the building. As I climbed up to the highest floor I asked myself one thing:

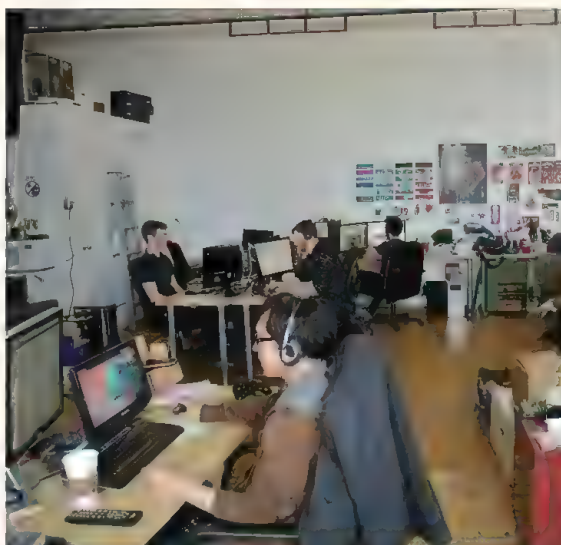
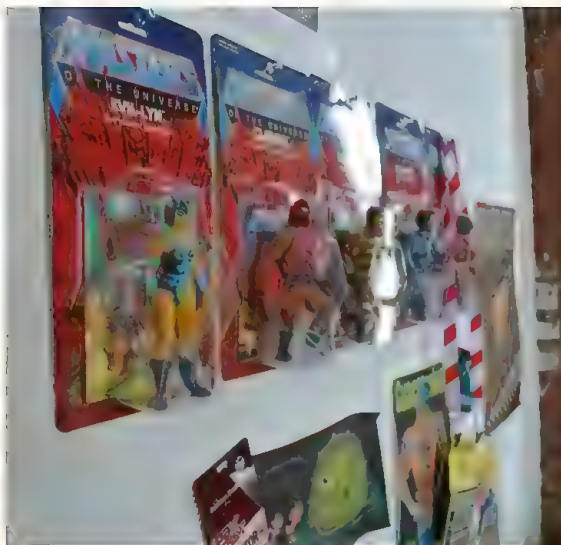
"Are these really the guys who made *Mutant Blobs Attack*?"

I was greeted by Matthew Johns, Senior Production Assistant and QA guy for the studio. Our voices echo as we speak. 12 other employees were staring intently at their screens. They were in the final stages of development on *Guacamelee!*.

Johns handed me a glass of water, and as I looked around I spotted a giant canvas image of Juan, protagonist of *Guacamelee!*, along with other, smaller posters surrounding him. The best thing on that wall though, were the five, unopened, *Masters of the Universe* action figures.

Okay, maybe these guys have a lot of fun at work. That's how Graham Smith wants it to be anyway.

Drinkbox Studios was created by Smith, Chris Harvey and Ryan Maclean in April 2008, weeks after the closure of their previous employer, Pseudo Interactive. In 2011, they released their first title, *Tales from Space: About a Blob*. A year later, they released the follow up, *Tales from Space: Mutant Blobs Attack*, which was a launch title for the PS Vita. In 2012, it was the fourth best rated game on the handheld, according to Metacritic.



Their latest title, *Guacamelee!*, has been getting equally impressive accolades already. It was an Independent Games Festival (IGF) finalist for Excellence in Visual Art. It was also critically praised as a “must-play” game by multiple outlets at Penny Arcade Expo East 2013.

The game was released on the PSN and PS Vita on Apr. 9, 2013. Thanks to proper co-ordination and advanced planning, the game has seen minimal delays. Even then, the delays were never officially announced.

“When we first started the project two years ago, we were aiming to finish it at the end of [2012],” said Smith. At this point, Smith, Johns and I had snuck away from the busy studio into a tiny room filled with furniture. Artwork from previous titles decorated the walls.

“But then, last year, we made a conscious decision to give ourselves a little bit more time because there were a lot of things that we wanted to get into the game. We’re all really excited about the idea that we have for this game and we all really felt like it would be a shame to try and cut off early.”

Co-op gameplay was something they had in mind from the very beginning.

“We did co-op before, in our first game *Tales from Space: About a Blob*,” Johns said, “and it’s something we all think is a fun thing. It adds a fun dimension to play the game with a friend, and wreak havoc on the gaming world.”

Smith added, “I still don’t know any other ‘Metroidvania’ games that have co-op.”

Smith says most of the issues with a co-op mode had to do with keeping players next to each other, on the same screen.

“We have hard camera transitions that were happening, so we had to teleport players and there are a lot of bugs that can happen. It has been a lot of extra work to add in co-op.”

Almost every new addition to a game is a new adventure for Drinkbox Studios. Due to budgetary constraints, which also impacted the size of the studio, they kept their ambitions in check. There was a time when there was a chance, albeit small, that *Guacamelee!* might not have existed.

“We decided, two years ago in February, that we wanted to go to the [Game Developer Conference] and try to pitch some new game ideas,” said Smith when speaking of the game’s origins. They had two ideas; one was *Guacamelee!*, and the second was a strategy game. Neither game was past the conceptual stage at that point.

“At that time, both the games were in paper form, like we had PowerPoint presentations for them,” said Smith, also reaffirming they, “[kept] our engine in mind, for both of the games.”



There was a long period of time when the founders were taking no salaries.





Eventually, potential publishing partners were more interested in *Guacamelee!*.

Drinkbox Studios didn't require financial backing, according to Smith. A partnership would simply allow them to attract a wider audience.

"The main reason we were in talks with other publishers was to get the game onto the Xbox [360]," he said.

"We didn't need any money from the publishers. Microsoft doesn't allow indie companies to self-publish their games, so you have to work with a publisher of some kind—either Microsoft or a third party publisher."

"Making a game is an expensive endeavour, unless everyone on the team is working for free, which is basically not happening here."

Before being approached by Sony, with their PlayStation Pub Fund, Drinkbox Studios were in negotiations with two other publishers when Smith said, "at a cer-

tain point, Sony came in and made us an offer for the Pub Fund, which is what we used for our first game as well. So then, we were kind of locked into the PS3 and PS Vita."

Along with the PlayStation Pub Fund, Drinkbox Studios have also used government funding.

"*Guacamelee!* was maybe 25 per cent our money, five per cent OMDC, and the remaining is the Canada Media Fund," Smith added.

Drinkbox Studios gained \$450,000 in funds as part of the Experimental Stream from the Canada Media Fund over two years of production. The Canada Media Fund has made two of the three payments."

Something new, even for Drinkbox Studios, was the addition of remote play. Both their previous projects were released for a single platform. With *Guacamelee!* they're simultaneously working on a console and handheld version of the game.

"We kind of ventured into the unknown with putting in remote play (or cross-platform control), using the Vita and the PS3 to control the first and second player," Johns said.

With the addition of remote play, a player will always have a mini-map on the handheld's screen. The D-Pad, which was originally used to manage the various powers that are found in *Guacamelee!*, can now control the directions instead. The inventory and power management has been moved to the touch screen instead.

"That's been quite a challenge to integrate and explore," Johns said.

"And debug," Smith added.

Guacamelee! did not win the IGF award, losing out to *Kentucky Route Zero*. But the game still has its fair share of accolades. With those accolades can come increased expectations.

"It's a lot of pressure, I've never been on a project like this, but it's also exciting as we're really trying hard to make something that people will enjoy," Johns said. His responsibilities have him looking after QA, and so a missed bug could ruin the experience. Though, when asked Smith, he was fairly satisfied with the final product.

"I think we did manage to meet our goal with the game, like making an interesting brawler—a silly, funny brawler—and a 'Metroidvania' game."

But there isn't a fixed amount of work that can guarantee the game financial and critical success, Smith admits.

"It's true, we've really been trying to pump this game up and whether or not it lives up to the expectations I guess is going to be in the hands of the public."

The game is now in the hands of that public, and it is only a matter of time before Drinkbox Studios will know just how successful *Guacamelee!* will be financially. If the game meets the studio's monetary goals, and Smith believes it will, it wouldn't be too much to ask for a sequel. Maybe then, Juan and Tostada will have a third dimension to phase through in *Guacamelee! 2*. **CG**



DANGEROUS

Deep Silver shows that there's something undead in the water



Dead Island was a zombie-slaying free-for-all that, while rife with objectives to complete and undead to massacre, was plagued with bugs and mediocre gameplay. *Dead Island Rip tide* is a new chapter in the lives of unfortunate survivors as they struggle to survive in a new area with new challenges and enemies that come with it. We talked to Sebastian Reichert, a producer on the game, for a little zombie one-on-one to get the inside scoop on a new dynamic weather system, wardrobe changes for the characters, and what will set apart this new tale in the *Dead Island* universe.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: *Dead Island's* marketing campaign has been erratic, with emotional teaser trailers for the first, and now ripped torso images in promotion for the new game. What is the direction the series is taking?

Seba Reichert: *Dead Island* is not just a game, we consider it an experience that will take you across many ideas. Right now, I can see that the messages you get

from us are manifold and this might be the reason why you feel we are shifting the positioning of the franchise. Eventually you will see all strings adding together. There is exciting news coming up – and once everything is unveiled, I believe you will agree that what we did makes perfect sense.

For the everlasting question about our trailer and its message, I suggest to differentiating between 'emotional' and 'narrative.' *Dead Island* was an extremely emotional experience, with an enormous amount of players investing three-digit numbers of playtime in our game, ground breaking numbers of co-op gameplay sessions, and just by having a look at our end-game achievements – we have an extremely dedicated audience. That said, *Dead Island* is fun to play and if you like badass zombie slaying, seems to be exactly what our fans wanted.

As an industry and as creative minds, we should start accepting games as a unique medium and not try to copy films and television. Our audiences are the storytellers, the creators of emotions and narratives. I personally love *The Walking Dead* game, being a fan of adventures anyway – this is just one facet of making

CURRENTS

Words by Brittany Vincent

games. With everything we create and design around *Dead Island*, we are providing gamers with the sandboxes, tools and mechanics to create their own stories. I consider that a very strong emotional experience.

Even if we touch a more narrative-driven approach in game design, we hand a lot of control over to the audience. Player freedom is something we insist on in every design direction decision—and the more information we can share about what is coming up, the more we hope to prove that point.

CGM: *Riptide* will feature a “dynamic weather system.” How much could this change things? Will it force players to work cooperatively to succeed rather than just act as a simple hindrance?

SR: A dynamic weather system is not an entirely new gameplay mechanic to create sufficient gameplay depth—no one will agree more than I do. However, it leads to far more cooperative elements with other mechanics, be it defending your vehicles, covering a new dimension



That moment you realize that your group survived without a single bullet left.



as the zombies will now even come for you from below – and extending the exploration opportunities. So we should focus on the setup, the combination of the elements and mechanics and how they fit together rather looking at them separately.

CGM: It makes little sense to travel alone in a zombie apocalypse, no matter how capable a fighter you are. Is that one of the reasons the friendly AI characters were added to the mix?

SR: How would you try to survive in a zombie infection? Cooperation is the key of survival. Whenever possible, players should find friends or at least temporary support in their missions. *Dead Island* offered fantastic opportunities to bring gamers together and this is an experience we still intend to enhance and to focus on.

Some new features require heavy cooperation and we did not want to limit our ideas and mechanics by having to design the entire game for a single player mode in parallel. Therefore, adding AI characters opened up a lot of options – and in addition, defending NPC's from getting bitten and turning (as otherwise Hell is coming after you) is another addition that comes with some new challenges.

CGM: The original game placed so much emphasis on said errand running and item-finding. How will *Riptide* enhance the “all alone in a zombie apocalypse” motif?

SR: We focused a lot on improving the interaction with the game world and other characters in *Dead Island Riptide*. Team building, crafting and communication will differ to the first game, so there is much improvement to expect.

CGM: One of the most exciting parts of *Dead Island* was scavenging for weapons and other parts to create armaments to defend against the horde. Since there are more guns on this island, will there be less of a focus on melee attacks?

SR: Close combat has been and will remain a focus in our core gameplay mechanics. The user experience is so intense and immersive, so abandoning that would probably be a very bad choice. We tweaked firearms by requests from our community, but they are still limited by resources.

CGM: How have the characters of *Riptide* evolved from their beginnings as racial stereotypes? What efforts have been made to diversify the characters so that it doesn't feel like you're playing with specialized “action figure” versions of real people trapped on an island?



SR: Every single character in the world of *Dead Island* offers some traits people like - and we insist on treating every character, regardless of skin colour, nationality or cultural background with the same laid-back, ironic approach. Having such a 'comic' style for our avatars allows us to focus on the gamer's experiences rather than digging into a scripted narrative experience.

I like the mentioning of action figures - as these are a perfect example of how we understand our mission. We grew up with them and - back then - created our own stories with Cap. America, Iron Man and the Hulk. *Dead Island* is not trying to be the *Avengers* movie, it is far more like an 'adult version' of sandbox gaming with action figures.

CGM: Has any consideration been given to customizing the characters' clothing and gear? Stilettos + the zombie apocalypse aren't exactly an ideal situation.

SR: We should never underestimate the kick ass power of stilettos - though we may have some goodies for you in *Dead Island Riptide* that should offer some more variety in that direction. However, *Dead Island* is not trying to be the 'most realistic zombie game ever.' I still love *Zombieland* as a movie and I feel it probably was not the most realistic one as well.

CGM: It was revealed that split-screen co-op will not be included in *Riptide*, noting "some limits" with the engine, What kind of limits?

SR: In some games, especially considering a focus on cooperative multiplayer, split-screen is a perfect addition to the overall experience. For *Dead Island*, we discussed this multiple times and while this is certainly an awesome idea, both limitations to the game engine and significant gameplay restrictions due to the effects on visual range resulted in not including this one here. One of our principles remains: If you cannot do it right, don't do it. And this one would have resulted in a 'PR only feature,' so we rather focused on mechanics and features that really improve the gameplay experience.

CGM: What's the greatest improvement from the original game that made it into *Riptide*?

SR: You will never forget the experience when you and your friends defend against hordes of zombies, coming after you from all, really, all, directions. Masses of them are breaking through your defences and while you are running out of ammo, screaming and shouting for help, knowing your buddies have been overrun as well, machine gunfire and explosions hammer into your ears. You forget that the guy going down next to you is a 'NPC' as he is torn apart by enemies, that a mission you considered a piece of cake is turning into a nightmare.

And then, the moment you realize that your group survived without a single bullet left, almost dead, standing in the midst of a pile of blood and flesh - you know that you did not buy just a game here - but some memories that will last quite a while.

That is what I love most about *Riptide*. **CG**





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Doing Them Justice

A look at the development of *Injustice: Gods Among Us*

Words by Tim Ashdown

O Working with iconic characters is just another day at the office for the likes of Ed Boon, Adam Urbano and the staff at NetherRealm. Not only is *Injustice: Gods Among Us* a new fighting game from the studio that brought you the successful 2011 reboot of *Mortal Kombat*, it's also a fighting game poised to bring the genre to its widest audience yet. Boon, Urbano, and the developers behind *Injustice* have pushed the ESRB and current generation hardware to its limits to create an accessible game with an original story, and astounding visuals that allows gamers to play as some of DC Comic's biggest names. I got to pull back the curtain on the game with *Injustice*'s Sr. Producer Adam Urbano at a recent media event here in Toronto, Ontario.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: What makes *Injustice* different from other fighting games?

Adam Urbano: We really pushed to compete with AAA games, not just AAA fighting games, our competition is *Call of Duty* and games like that. We have this huge story mode and a ton of offline content that isn't competitive. We have the S.T.A.R. Labs simulator which has hundreds and hundreds of one-off gameplay things for people to try if they're not great at fighting games and while they do that they'll pick up the gameplay.

CGM: Fighting games tend to have a specific audience, how have you and the team at NetherRealm made *Injustice* a more accessible fighting game?

AU: Our big thing is to try and expand the genre. We understand that fighting games are considered a niche and that's not what we make. We make games for the mass audience. For example the gameplay mechanics

are much simpler than traditional fighting games. There's three main buttons: a low medium, and a high then a gimmick button that just does some sort of crazy cool attack. Super moves are the two triggers and to interact with the environment is just one trigger. There's potential for a lot of depth there but mechanically it's simple enough that really anybody can pick up a controller and learn those basic buttons.

CGM: For obvious reasons your studio enjoys a close relationship with DC, how has this impacted development?

AU: The relationship we've had with DC this time around has been amazing. You know, usually when you hear a producer say that, it's bullshit it's just PR, but we're in constant contact with them. They've actually encouraged us to push the line further than we would have been comfortable with without them. Especially with some of

the things we're doing with characters and with violence. DC has given us both that general encouragement and some ideas and expertise that we would never have been able to have without DC Comics behind us. I can't think of a single negative thing, there was a long debate about where Superman's cape connected but that's about as bad as it got.

CGM: *NetherRealm* games tend to be on the violent side how did you address this issue in relation to DC characters while still remaining true to the studio pedigree?

AU: DC's line from the beginning was always "take it as far as you want and that will be the game," to the point where there was a period that where we were considering making this game M for Mature. Ultimately, we decided an M rated game wasn't the game we wanted to make. We still have character damage, we just don't have the crazy character damage we had in *Mortal*

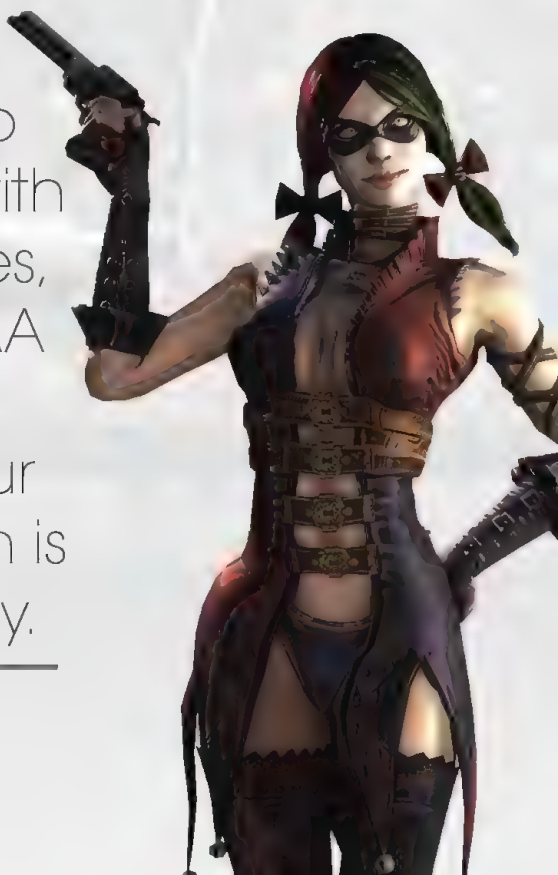
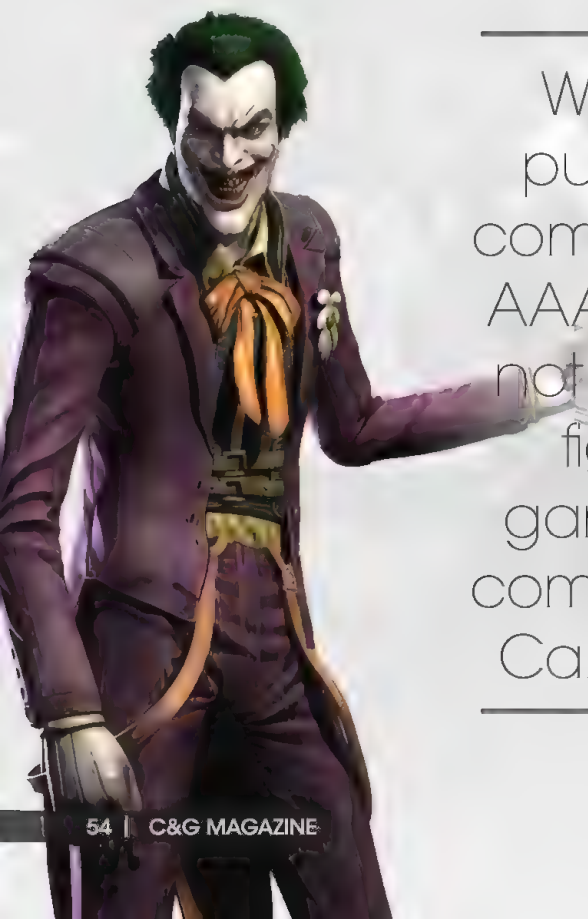
Kombat. We don't damage the face as much and we sort of keep the characters how you would naturally expect these semi-invincible people to behave if they were to be beaten up. We also really focused on the environment damage, it's more about the background being destroyed and buildings falling rather than tearing somebody's limbs off.

CGM: Do you think that *NetherRealm* has pushed the T rating as far as it will go with *Injustice*?

AU: Actually, we didn't pass the first several submissions to the ESRB. We definitely had to make changes, nothing that we weren't comfortable with but we went to the line and certainly beyond it, we then had to rein it back.

CGM: Is it better for developers to push things as far as it they can go and then scale it back?

We really pushed to compete with AAA games, not just AAA fighting games, our competition is *Call of Duty*.



AU: As long as you're a developer that's agile enough to be able to deal with that. Our team is so amazing and they managed to make changes fairly quickly, so for us it works out well. We always want to push boundaries in whatever we're doing it's just that it's extra work to pull it back and you have to factor that into your development schedule.

CGM: With *Injustice*, do you think that NetherRealm has pushed the Xbox 360 and PS3 hardware as far as it will go?

AU: I'm fairly confident that we've gone as far as we can with this particular engine. We have near 100 per cent SPU utilization on PS3 which is a nerdy fact but we're pegging the hardware. I think there's a few things we would have liked to go further on, but with the hardware we couldn't. We're very proud of what we've created but new hardware always means we can do newer, cooler things, so we're ready for new stuff.

CGM: What can you tell me about the Wii U version of *Injustice*, will it have any exclusive modes and how will it make use of the Wii U's touch screen?

AU: One of the key features with the touch pad is the move list. Which gives people a chance to look at the screen and the list at the same time. There's no exclusive modes, but what we really wanted to focus on was getting the Wii U version at 60 frames per second. That way the experience is similar to the one found on the other platforms. The Wii U version is the full *Injustice* experience not one that's been watered down.

CGM: What process went into selecting the playable characters on the *Injustice* roster?

AU: A lot of fighting. Essentially, we started out years ago in pre-production with a loose outline of the story

we wanted to tell and that guided some of the characters. Then there's a balance between male and female that we like to keep, that way there's plenty of both. It then comes down to which characters are fun, which characters people want to fight with, and even which characters we think might be sort of unknown. All of those pieces go into the equation, then there's some fist fights, and we wind up with the final roster.

CGM: Who's your favourite character?

AU: I dressed up as Superman every Halloween for the first... far too many years of my life. There's a joke character whom I've always pushed to get into the game who's suddenly become my favourite and that is Detective Chimp. Every day I would try and find a way to convince someone to try and sneak him in and he just became my favourite.

CGM: Is he in the game?

AU: ... [Silence] **CG**



VS

VERSUS

BATTLING UNNECESSARY EVENTS IN COMICS

Words by Nicole Rodriguez

There was a time when super heroes existed separately from each other. When Batman fought crime in Gotham while Superman patrolled the skies of Metropolis and never the twain did meet. Each hero had their own responsibilities, including the safety of planet Earth, and they stuck to them, saving the day every time despite the impossible odds stacked against them. Imagine being a fan during those days, when the first comic book crossovers started to happen; realizing that not only did Gotham and Metropolis exist in the same United States of America, but Superman and Batman could team up to fight a big bad, or face off against each other through some villainous plot. Crossovers even allowed the mightiest heroes on the planet to join forces and create something entirely new: a team of superheroes (e.g. The Justice League of America or The Avengers) who would come together when a threat too large to stand alone against presented itself. The excitement! The possibilities!

More and more heroes began making cameos in each other's books, and before long, even their uni-

verses began to align. One heroes' Earth shattering battle would have ramifications in another heroes' book, or a villain would cross the pages of multiple comics during their reign of terror—before inevitably being brought down by the good guys, of course. These universe-encompassing battles were labelled Events, a catchall term for any major happenstance in a comic that usually included characters not normally a part of that series coming together for the greater good. Events were originally quite rare, only bringing heroes or villains together when things were truly dire (e.g. *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, *Secret Invasion*). Though usually this culminated in a large battle or the death of a hero, Events also set the stage for major lasting changes for that universe. In the 2004 *House of M* crossover Event, Scarlet Witch uttered three simple words that negated an entire species—“No more mutants.” The consequences of that simple statement brought mutant kind close to extinction, and it shaped Marvel storylines to this day for both mutants and humanity. *House of M*'s impact is undeniable, both in the Marvel Universe and



through comic sales. Events make money by bringing attention to a series with promises of shocking stories and thrills for readers, making those books more “collectable” in the process. It draws fans and collectors to buy a series. Though events are usually just a sales tactic, they can also shape these beloved characters’ worlds, which makes it even more of a shame that they’re so overused.

Marvel and DC have the largest character universes and histories, so they’re usually the culprits for event fatigue, though other publishers are unfortunately following suit. If you pick up one of the Big Two’s comics today, you’ll likely find a banner on the cover advertising the latest crossover or event happening in that series. Events are so common now, they’re nearly indistinguishable from regular storylines, with one event leading directly into the next. Some affect the entire universe while others stick to similarly themed books—e.g. The recent *Death of the Family* event that affected only Batman related titles like *Batgirl*, *Red Robin*, etc. Events may also include limited crossover titles, as

a supplement to existing series that are also a part of the same story. It’s not uncommon for stories to jump between several books, forcing readers to buy titles they normally wouldn’t in order to get the whole story.

Though they can be annoying, events are not inherently bad. Tying what happens in one book to another makes sense. A good team of editors takes a holistic look at a universe to see what every character is up to, and how that might impact other stories. This makes sure that if part of New York is destroyed in a battle between Spider-Man and Doc Ock, that same area isn’t miraculously unscathed in the next issue of the *Fantastic Four*. It makes for a more seamless experience for readers, ensuring they’re not pulled out of the story because of continuity errors. Believability is incredibly important, even if your hero swings through the city using super strength and spider webbing. Anchoring the story in a real city adds to that believability, so destroying part of it should not be done lightly, and it should not be glossed over if another hero stumbles across it.

With so many heroes crossing over into other books for cameos, having editors keep tabs on them should, in theory, prevent them from being over-used. If the current story calls for a hero who can phase through solid objects, it makes perfect sense to call in Kitty Pryde or The Martian Manhunter to help out. That's a crossover tailored to the heroes abilities or knowledge, putting their precise skill-set to use, while giving fans some variety in the books' usual cast of characters. Unfortunately, what ends up happening instead is that popular heroes appear in books where they're really not needed, just showing up to boost sales. See Wolverine's career for examples.

Of course, it would be impossible for editors to try and make all the pieces of a comic puzzle fit— issue by issue, month by month— especially when being pressured to include characters or stories by other departments like Marketing or Toy Development. Sometimes it's simply beyond their control. However, with major publishers looking at the bigger picture when it comes to their characters' universe, now more than they have in the past, there is reason to be optimistic. But as always, there's also room for improvement.

No More Events

At least for a while. They should be a rarity, not a monthly shtick. By making every story an Event, it makes no story remarkable. Arguably, this non-stop conflict and drama may be the life of a hero, but that doesn't mean every fight is the ultimate battle. Of course, phrasing it that way sells more books— the end goal of any publisher. There are other ways to do that without sacrificing good stories. Ideally, writers, artists, colourists, letterers and editors, are all in service to the story they're telling. Good storytelling, through words and pictures, is what will keep readers coming back for more. Part of that is pacing. Knowing when to slow down for a bit, to build up the tension and excitement for the next denouement. Let your heroes and universe recover from time to time, not through a vacation, but through interesting stories that don't rely on tiresome "End of the World" clichés to artificially ramp up tension. Make readers care about your characters before plopping them into a huge battle with an incalculable cast. By focusing on telling the best stories out there, publishers won't need to rely on cheap gimmicks like 24/7 Events or reboots to sell comics. That's better for the medium, for readers, and for publishers in the long term, as they'll build more brand loyalty from their readers.

Plus that gives everyone a damn good excuse to get excited about an Event, and who doesn't love a good nerdy party? **C&G**

*Making every story
an Event makes no
story remarkable.*





The Journey Goes On

An interview with Ragnar Tørnquist

Words by Wayne Santos

Ø *The Longest Journey* has certainly lived up to its name. Often hailed as one of the great adventure games of all time, this science fiction/fantasy mash up took critics and audiences by storm when it released in 2000. The combination of compelling characters and epic story made all the difference, and the saga continued with *Dreamfall* in 2006. Since then, series has been on something of a hiatus as the creator Ragnar Tørnquist and the publisher, Funcom, focused on the MMO genre. All that changed in February when Ragnar started up a new studio and put out a plea on Kickstarter to help invest in a sequel. The fans responded, and the game is now in production. We managed to ask Ragnar a few questions about his new found success and the challenges ahead.

Comics & Gaming Magazine: What made you decide now to go back to *The Longest Journey*?

Ragnar Tørnquist: Lots of reasons, actually. First off, I'd just finished *The Secret World*, a massive game with a massive team that had eaten up the past six years of my life – I wanted to do something smaller and more personal. I also felt that I'd been with Funcom long enough. It's a great place to work with great people, but I needed to do something else, for my own sake, before it was too late.

Also, with the rise of Kickstarter, alternative distribution models, new platforms, it really is the age of the



Dreamfall: The Longest Journey's Zoë Castillo will be returning for *Dreamfall Chapters*

indies, and I wanted to be a part of that. I wanted to get back to my roots and to be hands-on with games again. And, of course, it's been almost seven years now. It's time. It's way past time.

CGM: The Kickstarter effort was an obvious – and very fast – success. Did you think it was going to go this well this quickly?

RT: No, absolutely not! We were flabbergasted. So flabbergasted that we actually used the word 'flabbergasted.' Our most optimistic estimates were around \$200,000 for the first 24 hours, and we never thought we'd make that. We made \$400,000 in less than a day. It was shocking. We didn't quite know what to do with ourselves.

We'd expected to be biting our nails for 30 days, so when we reached our original goal in a week, it was such a relief. It allowed us to focus on other things, like creating more updates, new content, and to actually work on the game.

CGM: What made you decide to go this route, rather than just have Funcom publish the next installment?

RT: Funcom's business is in the online space, and they didn't really know how to make *The Longest Journey* saga fit with that. It's not really the sort of game they make anymore. So I decided to secure the rights to the series and start up a new studio, completely independent of Funcom. Funcom gets a share of our profits, due to the licensing agreement, but that's it – they're not involved or invested in any other way.

I also wanted to do something on my own, together with people I've known and worked with for a long time, and this was that chance, and the right project. Everything came together at the right time.

CGM: It seems like out of all the genres being pitched on Kickstarter, adventure games seem to enjoy the most support and success, despite publishers themselves being leery of the genre. Why do you think that is?

RT: I think there is a very big, very strong and very vocal niche audience for adventures, and it includes a lot of people who have grown up, and who may be disillusioned with the general state of games. So there's a lot of people with disposable income who have been waiting for a long time for this genre to 'return', and for their favourite games to continue.

I do think that adventure games are proving themselves commercially viable again, and we'll probably see more crowd-funded adventures in the years to come. But we're still talking about a niche here; it just happens to be a very large niche.



CGM: Funcom giving you permission to take a property they technically own and run away with it is the exact opposite of most stories concerning publishers and developers. Can you tell us much about the story of how they entrusted *The Longest Journey* to you like that?

RT: My advantage was that I'd created the saga, and I think they understand that it'd be difficult to make another game in the series without me. This way, they are able to reap some rewards without having to take the risk of investing in a new single-player adventure game – which, to be fair, is not part of their core business anymore.

But Funcom has been very helpful, open and generous by granting us this license. Like you said, you wouldn't see most publishers allowing something like this – it really is a unique opportunity, and one we greatly appreciate. We hope we can repay Funcom by making the game a massive hit!

CGM: Now that you're officially with Red Thread, what kind of working relationship do you have with Funcom?

RT: I'm still technically involved with *The Secret World*, in a creative consultant role, but very soon I won't be part of Funcom anymore – I'll be 100 per cent Red Thread Games. And that's strange, Funcom has been most of my adult life, almost all of my working life, and it's been my home and my family for 18 years. It's odd to finally leave, but since I'm working with many former colleagues on a sequel to a Funcom game, it's almost like coming home again – just in a different building, under a different letterhead... and with total freedom to make the game we want to make.

CGM: What's going to happen now in production?

RT: We're working on the prototype still, and will continue to do so for another couple of months. After that, we're staffing up for the full production. We'll be running at full speed and capacity come August, and then it's a race for the finish line, November 2014. We will be in pretty much constant crunch between now and then. We have a tight budget, a big game to make, and a lot of people who trust us to tell a great story.

CGM: *The Longest Journey* has been in hiatus for many years now from a production viewpoint, but creatively, have you continued to work on it over the years?

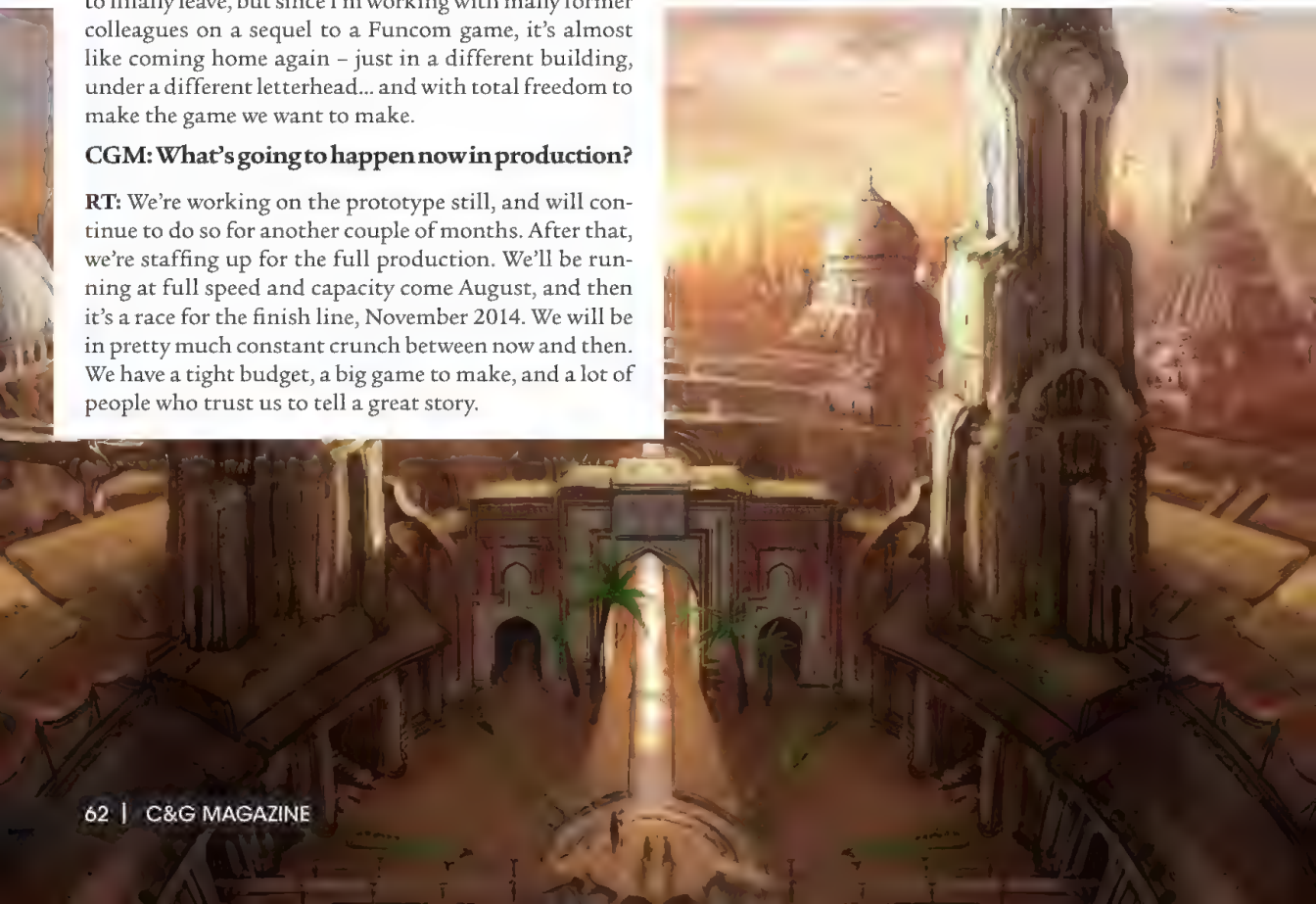
RT: Absolutely. I've been tinkering with the story for a long time. Not a day has gone by without some idea popping into my head, and I've constantly wondered about the characters and the worlds – how they're getting on. It's such a pleasure to finally be able to return to it all.

CGM: Is this the conclusion of *The Longest Journey* story?

RT: *Dreamfall Chapters* is the conclusion of the Dreamer Cycle, which began with *Dreamfall*. It is not the end of *The Longest Journey* saga, no. But we're not saying what's next. Not yet. Our first and primary focus is on *Dreamfall Chapters*.

CGM: With the advent of a new generation of consoles, and the success of episodic adventure games like *The Walking Dead* on consoles, is the environment for downloadable games on consoles something Red Thread will explore?

RT: For sure. It's something we're looking very closely at, and hey, who wouldn't want to develop for the PlayStation 4? **C&G**





**We're not saying
what's next.
Not yet.**



REVIEWS

BioShock Infinite

Tomb Raider

Guacamelee!

Injustice: Gods Among Us

StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm

Gears of War: Judgment

Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel

Gods of War: Ascension

Mini Reviews:

Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Gates to Infinity

Mass Effect 3: Citadel

Comics:

The Black Beetle #3

Robyn Hood vs. Red Riding Hood

Hawkeye: My Life As A Weapon

Winter Soldier Vol.3 Black Widow Hunt

REVIEW GUIDE:

90 - 100

Games with little to no flaws that provide an exceptional entertainment experience. New high watermarks of quality or design are established with such titles, and these games are must-haves for fans of the genre as well as good places for newcomers to start.

80 - 89

Games that manage to provide a good, entertaining experience with only small flaws that are overlooked by the polish or innovation of the title. Both fans and newcomers to the genre will likely find something to appreciate here.

70 - 79

Games that manage to keep mechanical, technical and design flaws to a minimum while providing a solid experience. Generally enough to satisfy but not impress fans or gamers outside the genre.

60 - 69

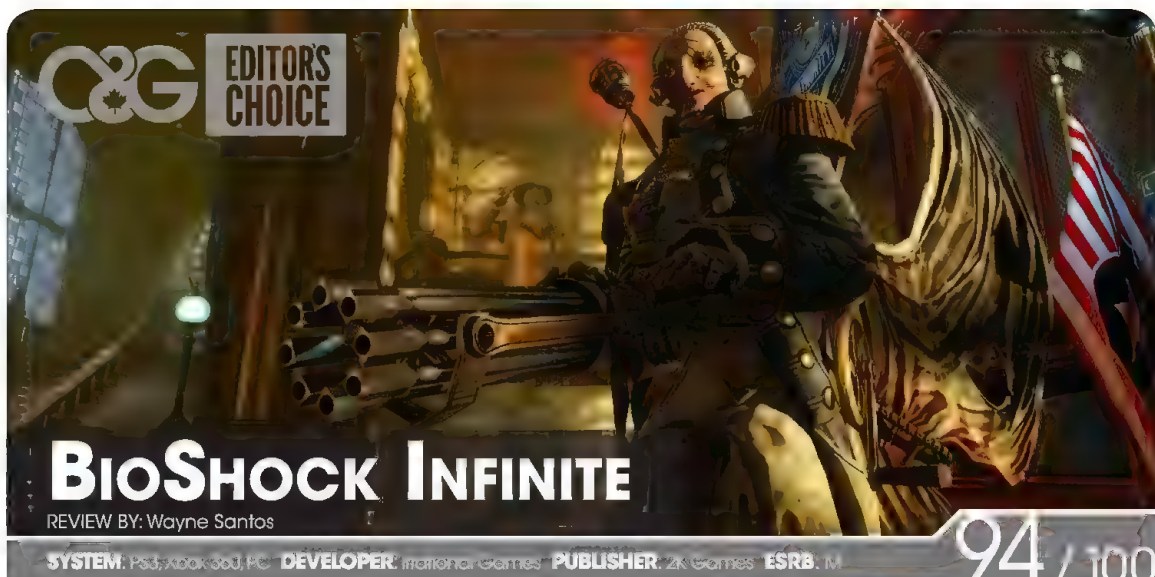
Games that manage to get it mostly right functionally, without ever really moving beyond that. Flaws present can still have an impact on the experience. Fans of the genre and more tolerant gamers can enjoy these titles.

50-59

Games that meet the minimum requirements of functionality, but just barely. Mechanical, technical and design problems are still present, though not to the point of complete unplayability. Only desperate fans would see value in these titles.

Below 50

Games that fail to meet even the most basic requirements of entertainment and competence with serious mechanical and/or design flaws. Avoid at all costs.



Poking The Beehive



When *BioShock* first landed on consoles many console veterans didn't know what to expect.

PC gamers, on the other hand, expected a dark, moody, atmospheric game that breathed life into its characters via audio recordings, and put players through a gaming experience by turns filled with unique mechanics and occasionally even threw out some scares. What no one expected was the level of uncompromising political critique of Objectivism and the way it was weaved seamlessly into a provocative examination of the way we play games. In one fell swoop, Ken Levine established himself as the 'philosophical bad boy' of gaming. Now he's gone and done it again.

A Return To The Bad Old Days

BioShock Infinite, just like its predecessor, starts out with a simple premise of a man making his way to a lighthouse. But where the original was a tale of seeming disaster and survival, the story of Booker DeWitt is that of a man on mission. He owes a massive debt to someone and that debt will be cleared if he goes to the flying city of Columbia and escapes with a girl named Elizabeth. Mind you, this flying city is soaring the skies in the year 1912, and it is literally heaven on Earth as long as you're rich, Caucasian and American. Over the course of the game, the narrative manages to walk an incredibly delicate tightrope, balancing a critique of American exceptionalism, religious zealotry, a tale of redemption and... quantum theory. Somehow, it actually succeeds at this. This is a bold, imaginative tale full of challenging and provocative ideas and it is amazing that in a world where unquestioningly "heroic" American soldier FPS games are the industry standard, it managed

to get made. It is also a remarkably unpleasant story, exposing a side of America that most people would like to forget existed, with a casual, institutionalized prejudice that immerses players in ways no book or movie can. For many younger gamers in North America, this is likely a surprising reminder that, like modern Germany of the 21st century, there are things in the history of the USA that are shameful. Depending on the political leanings of the individual player, this game is in some ways a Republican heaven, or nightmare. It is a necessary, but unpleasant experience. This is definitely Ken Levine's strongest overall story, though it lacks the same laser-like focus as the original *BioShock* which was a ruthless examination of the foibles of Objectivism. Levine successfully juggles his various elements, but the political critique gets less time in the light as the other balls come into play. This isn't a slight to the story, as it's probably going to be one of the best of the year — likely the generation — but it does mean that fans looking for a heavier political focus may be left wanting.

In the visuals department, *Infinite* poses no new surprises. This is still the Unreal engine, creaking along as it must in the twilight of this console generation. It's been optimized so the uglier characteristics of the past, like delayed loading in of higher res textures, have been largely addressed, but there's still some discrepancy between platforms. PC obviously fares best for those with the rig to handle maxed out settings, while the Xbox 360 and PS3 look less tidy, though still quite playable with stable framerates throughout. Of the two, the 360 version looks slightly crisper in the texture resolution department, and the PS3 suffers from occasional screen tearing. Again, none of this is extreme, but it does

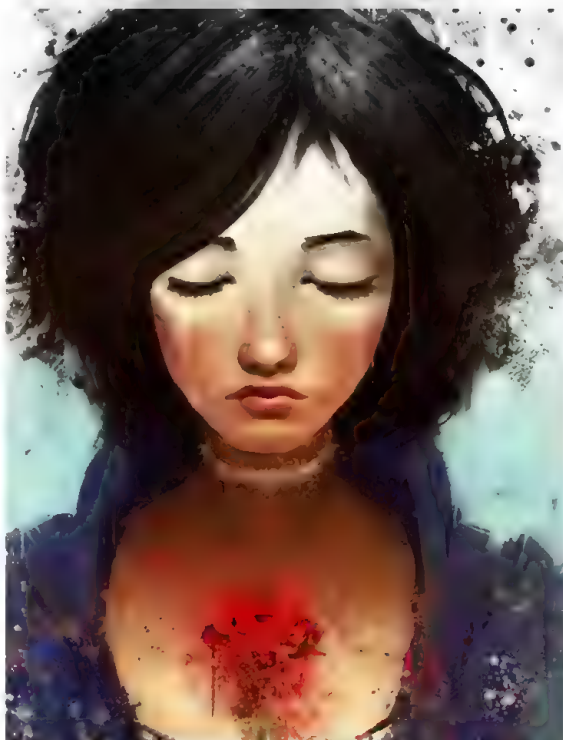
look like the PS3 is still giving multiplatform developers some problems with maintaining parity. On the other hand, the real scene stealer here is the phenomenal job the art team has done. As with *BioShock*, *Infinite* is a wonder of historical recreation. The 50s art deco atmosphere of a gloomy, broken undersea city has been replaced with the bright sunshine of the industrial era, full of illustrated posters, classical buildings, and a lot of wood, stone and steel to reflect this pre-plastic era. It is an impressive work of atmosphere building, and, like its predecessor, puts gaming's best foot forward as an argument for immersing an audience in a world.

The audio of the game is going to be a standout this year, and will probably win awards. Courtnee Draper, the voice actor for Elizabeth, puts in one of the best performances of the year for a game, though she is apparently now retired and going back to law school. Troy Baker does a workmanlike job voicing Booker DeWitt and many of the usual, high profile voice acting suspects such as Yuri Lowenthal and the ubiquitous Jennifer Hale all put in appearances with the expected, quality results. The music is probably the highlight of the audio package, with conventional orchestrated scoring for the dramatic moments, tense strings for combat, and, perhaps most surprising of all, period renditions of Generation X bands such as *Tears for Fears*, *R.E.M.* and even *Soft Cell* (or *Gloria Jones*, depending on how much of a purist you are). It's one of those startling, 'they absolutely did not need to do it, but it's mind blowing that they did' touches that separates the game from so many others for the sheer amount of unnecessary but appreciated effort. The actual quality of the audio is also top notch, with lots of directional sound taking place beside, behind and every other direction. The guns carry a good amount of force behind them and when things explode, *Infinite* isn't afraid to take advantage of the subwoofer to loud effect. It is a top notch audio presentation, evocative and making full use of multi-speaker systems.

High Mobility Shooting

For people that played *BioShock*, this is essentially more of the same. Moody, atmospheric shooting in a period setting, but with something called "Vigors" instead of "Plasmids." It's still not as run n' gun as a typical *Call of Duty* game, and it still provides an array of tools to use beyond just shooting as part of its combat regimen. There's still a period recreation of all the usual standbys like a pistol, a shotgun and an automatic weapon of some kind, in addition to heavier options like rocket launchers. But there are also some tweaks to the central concept, such as the addition of *Halo*-like shields that can now absorb the first few waves of bullet fire and then require time to recharge, while health itself is regained through food and medical kits. Even the Vigors themselves have gotten a tweak, with an emphasis on a primary, one attack mode, and a secondary "trap

BioShock Infinite is 2013's first easy nomination for Game of the Year.



laying" mode that allows players to lay out a variety of traps – from fire and electricity, to murderous crows – that only activate when enemies walk over them.

The two biggest changes to combat are in the form of skyrails and 'tears' in reality. The skyrail is probably the most exciting addition simply because of the mobility it offers players. Essentially it's a 'roller coaster in the air,' allowing the player to vault towards it if sufficiently close enough, and then simply ride the rail around the area, shooting at people, or targeting them and vaulting off with another press of the button to deal massive melee damage. It dramatically changes the pace of combat, allowing players to just yank themselves out of a tight spot, circle to another area, and drop off to either change tactics or simply get a breather while shields recharge. The other addition is 'tears' in the fabric of reality, which contain anything from weapons to cover, to automated allies. On request, Elizabeth can open up these tears and manifest the selected item for



In one fell swoop, Ken Levine established himself as the "philosophical bad boy" of gaming.

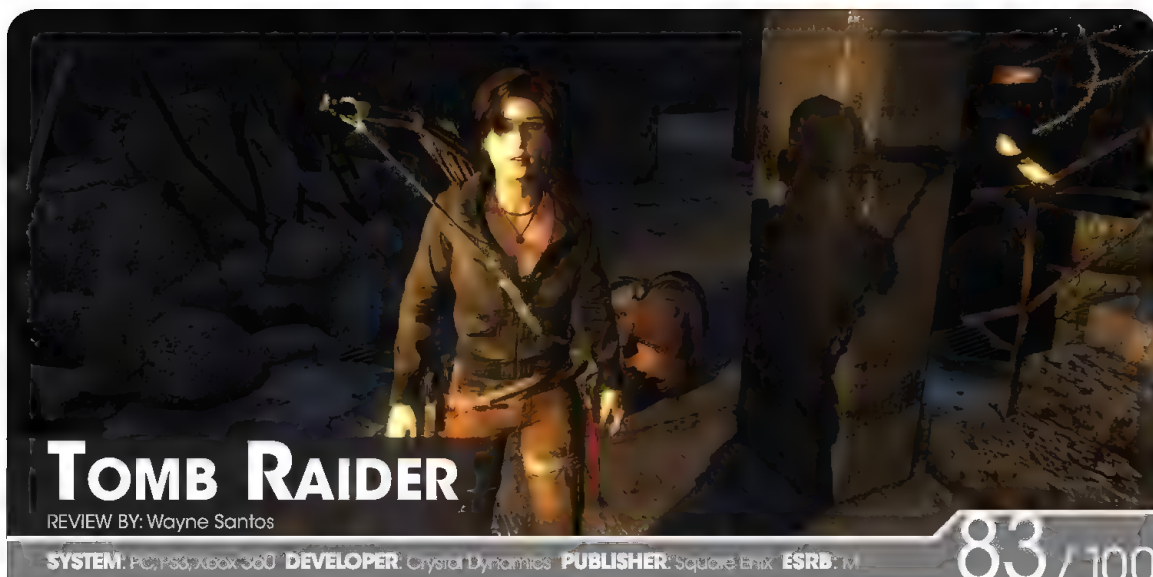
a quick heal, or sudden assist from a turret gun. She can also randomly throw ammo or healing items at the player. She never actively participates in combat, but she also never gets in the way, nor is it ever required that she be protected in the agonizing manner of most escort missions.

In many ways, the addition of the recharging shield with item based health, plus a variety of powers to mix up with weapons and the verticality and mobility of the skyrails, makes combat in *Infinite* feel like the first *Halo*. There's a sense of freedom and experimentation to the combat. The pace of the game moves from the pleasure of exploring a world to conventional corridor shooting, to opening things up with large playground battlefields that invite the player to see how many different ways to fight. This is not a stereotypical FPS by any means, the pacing of the game appeals to a broader crowd than those that want to sit at one end of a corridor while mowing down enemies that stream from the other end.

And it's here, in the pacing, that *BioShock Infinite* reveals why it's one of the best games of 2013. In addition to the unique style of combat, the game isn't afraid to slow things down and allow players to simply absorb the atmosphere of the painstakingly detailed city of Columbia, nor is it afraid to tackle philosophy, religion, ideology, economics, or even revolution and all the ways that humans mess these ideas up. It's also not afraid to look at meaningful relationships and their cost, or the edgier ideas being explored in quantum theory, and yet all of this is somehow thrown into a blender and

turned into a first person shooter. Some things take the shine off the overall package; Levine is still using many of the same narrative devices he used all the way back in 1999 with *System Shock 2* and *BioShock*, so what's compelling here is the story, not the way it's told. There are also occasional AI issues, with Elizabeth frequently running off and talking to you about potential points of interest which you can't even see, because she's gone off on her own. There's also the fact that for PS3 owners, there's some implementation of Move and while it works, it doesn't work well (moving the reticle to the edge of the screen to turn once again rears its ugly head) although this is also counterbalanced by the fact that the PS3 version includes a copy of the original *BioShock* on the disc for those that somehow missed it the first time. And of course, for some, the lack of multiplayer might hurt, but it's honestly unnecessary here, and a testament to Irrational Game's common sense that they didn't waste time or money creating the mode.

All in all, however, *BioShock Infinite* is 2013's first, easy nomination for game of the year. The first person shooting brings something new to the table, while the pacing caters to those without ADD, and the story assumes you're a reasonably mature human being with a taste for something beyond the intellectual equivalent of pablum. There will always be a place for big dumb shooters, but there is also a place for big smart ones. *BioShock Infinite* is one of the rare titles of this generation that fills the role of the latter. Any self respecting hardcore gamers needs to play this game. **C&G**



New Beginnings

Reboots have been a pretty big thing in recent years. They have a singular purpose; taking an established property that is well known—and perhaps a tad too familiar to audiences by this point—and going back to the start. Reboots tinker with origins, change details and subsequently perceptions of the property, hopefully also changing the attitude of the audience, making a stale character seem new, fresh and exciting. It's worked for Batman, it's worked for James Bond and now it seems, it's worked for Lara Croft as well.

Coming Of Age In Blood & Fire

This is an origin story, a tale of a young, recently graduated student by the name of Lara Croft. She's on a ship bound for the seas east of Japan in search of the fabled lost island kingdom of Yamatai, somewhere in a region known as the Dragon's Triangle. This isn't a single expedition funded by the considerable wealth of a titled lady, but a reality TV project with which Lara is attached as a researcher and assistant. She's not a highly trained killer or member of the British upper class. Instead she's an orphan of wealthy parents who refuses to touch the family money, working to put herself through University College London rather than be a trust fund baby that sailed through Cambridge or Oxford. She's smart, brave, capable and in no way prepared for the shipwreck and crazed cult that terrorize her first serious archaeological expedition. And it is this flawed, vulnerable, terrified, completely out of her depth character that makes *Tomb Raider* such a gripping story as she rises to the challenge anyway. Characters—at least the crew of the *Endurance*—are nuanced and believable, dialogue is natural and there's a definite

arc of character development that makes players feel like they've been through a harrowing journey along with Lara, and come out the better for it.

When you get into the visuals, it's difficult to believe that this is still the same developer that released *Tomb Raider: Underworld* back in 2008. Aside from the more realistically proportioned Lara, the environments and level of detail have received such dramatic improvement it feels like it came from an entirely different studio. *Tomb Raider* moves away from the exotic, more fantastical elements of the franchise for a much more grounded, intensely realized setting. Rather than the traditional globetrotting to various locales, the action is focused on the island of Yamatai with its forests and medieval Japanese ruins, as well as the detritus of many shipwrecks over the centuries. This makes for a variety of different environments with an impressive amount of detail as well as atmospheric lighting, from gloomy torch lit caves to spectacular island sunsets. It's a winning endorsement for Square Enix that their Crystal Engine holds up so well outside of *Final Fantasy*. The animation also deserves special mention. The art team has shamelessly aped Naughty Dog with the *Uncharted* series, creating a suite of convincing 'average' animations to show the player that this isn't some high society ubermensch with guns, but a scared young woman chilled to the bone from exposure to the elements, or walking uncertainly on a cliff's edge, always keeping her hand on the wall for support. Like Nathan Drake her jumps are awkward, with a breath holding moment as she may—or may not—successfully grip onto a ledge, and like Nathan Drake, all these animations showing how flawed and vulnerable she is merely make her more relatable to players, as we'd probably do the same thing.

Unfortunately, the talent on display here is marred slightly by a few technical issues. The massive jump in visuals comes at a hit to performance. There are slight but regular drops in the frame-rate as the hardware struggles to keep pace with the details on show, particularly during cut scenes. Some graphic glitches also regularly occur such as walking into a room and “falling into the world,” where the engine fails to properly load in the next piece of environment. There’s also the occasional encounter with “floating” objects such as weapons or barrels hovering in the air. None of this is game breaking, but it’s apparent that the consoles of this generation are at their upper limit.

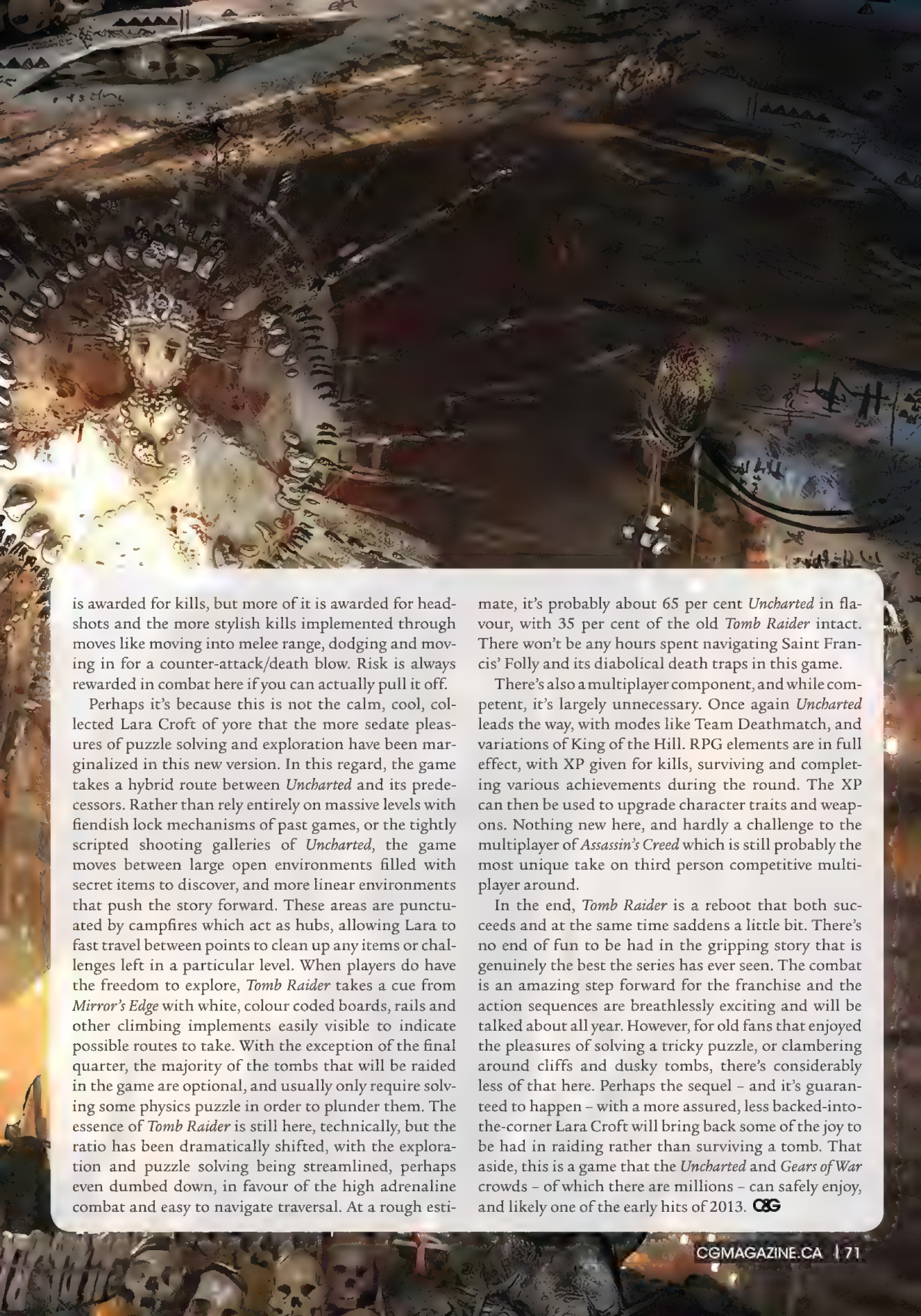
The sound is also good, though it doesn’t quite soar to the same heights as the visuals. Camilla Luddington steps into the shoes vacated by Keeley Hawes, and does a convincing job of presenting a younger, more uncertain Lara Croft. Her performance is actually one of the highlights of the game, bolstered by a cast of capable voice actors with no real weak links. The music is similarly competent, though the iconic theme of the *Tomb Raider*—while teasingly evoked from time to time—is absent. Gunfire is punchy, with presence and because of the occasional stealth nature of the gameplay, directional audio plays a role too. One consistent irritation is the audio effect for the “survival instinct,” the *Tomb Raider* equivalent to *Assassin’s Creed*’s “Eagle Vision.” The sound effect is a big, rich, sub-woofer laden “boom” that sounds like distant heavy artillery fire. It can grate on the nerves when searching for hidden items throughout a level, and feels like Lara is running around in the trenches in WWI.

Tomb Survivor

This is a very different *Tomb Raider* from the games of the past. Traditionalists who enjoyed the slower paced, exploratory gameplay of environmental puzzles to solve and just figuring out how to get from point A to point B are in for disappointment. It’s ironic that in many ways the *Tomb Raider* franchise is what inspired *Uncharted* and now for this latest sequel, it’s *Uncharted* that has clearly inspired much of *Tomb Raider*. This is not about raiding tombs so much as it is just getting through the next fire fight, or incredibly cinematic set-piece action sequence. Lara isn’t trying to plumb any mysteries here, she’s just trying to stay alive and that’s a theme that carries on throughout the entire game.

Gone is the clunky dual wielding pistol combat, replaced with a snappy, responsive cover-based shooter and melee engine that is probably the highlight of the game. Combat is now a thrilling joy rather than an awkward interval to break up the pace of exploration. And it’s a good thing that it’s so finely tuned, since it now makes up the bulk of the experience. Lara controls more tightly and responsively than ever before, a critical necessity with this more combat based iteration. This combat is supplemented with RPG-lite mechanics, with Lara collecting XP for kills that she can use to purchase new skills, as well as an in-game currency, “salvage” which she acquires from looting bodies and collecting equipment scattered around Yamatai. When she has enough, she can use this to upgrade her weapons, which run the usual gamut from pistols to shotguns and, perhaps in a nod to *The Hunger Games*, the bow. XP

The best story
the series has
ever seen.



is awarded for kills, but more of it is awarded for headshots and the more stylish kills implemented through moves like moving into melee range, dodging and moving in for a counter-attack/death blow. Risk is always rewarded in combat here if you can actually pull it off.

Perhaps it's because this is not the calm, cool, collected Lara Croft of yore that the more sedate pleasures of puzzle solving and exploration have been marginalized in this new version. In this regard, the game takes a hybrid route between *Uncharted* and its predecessors. Rather than rely entirely on massive levels with fiendish lock mechanisms of past games, or the tightly scripted shooting galleries of *Uncharted*, the game moves between large open environments filled with secret items to discover, and more linear environments that push the story forward. These areas are punctuated by campfires which act as hubs, allowing Lara to fast travel between points to clean up any items or challenges left in a particular level. When players do have the freedom to explore, *Tomb Raider* takes a cue from *Mirror's Edge* with white, colour coded boards, rails and other climbing implements easily visible to indicate possible routes to take. With the exception of the final quarter, the majority of the tombs that will be raided in the game are optional, and usually only require solving some physics puzzle in order to plunder them. The essence of *Tomb Raider* is still here, technically, but the ratio has been dramatically shifted, with the exploration and puzzle solving being streamlined, perhaps even dumbed down, in favour of the high adrenaline combat and easy to navigate traversal. At a rough esti-

mate, it's probably about 65 per cent *Uncharted* in flavour, with 35 per cent of the old *Tomb Raider* intact. There won't be any hours spent navigating Saint Francis' Folly and its diabolical death traps in this game.

There's also a multiplayer component, and while competent, it's largely unnecessary. Once again *Uncharted* leads the way, with modes like Team Deathmatch, and variations of King of the Hill. RPG elements are in full effect, with XP given for kills, surviving and completing various achievements during the round. The XP can then be used to upgrade character traits and weapons. Nothing new here, and hardly a challenge to the multiplayer of *Assassin's Creed* which is still probably the most unique take on third person competitive multiplayer around.

In the end, *Tomb Raider* is a reboot that both succeeds and at the same time saddens a little bit. There's no end of fun to be had in the gripping story that is genuinely the best the series has ever seen. The combat is an amazing step forward for the franchise and the action sequences are breathlessly exciting and will be talked about all year. However, for old fans that enjoyed the pleasures of solving a tricky puzzle, or clambering around cliffs and dusky tombs, there's considerably less of that here. Perhaps the sequel – and it's guaranteed to happen – with a more assured, less backed-into-the-corner Lara Croft will bring back some of the joy to be had in raiding rather than surviving a tomb. That aside, this is a game that the *Uncharted* and *Gears of War* crowds – of which there are millions – can safely enjoy, and likely one of the early hits of 2013. **CG**



Guacamelee! is a game in which a Mexican wrestler can transform into a chicken to reach hidden areas, where he might learn from his mystical goat master how to suplex skeletons in sombreros.

Sure, it may sound like someone drank too much tequila out in the hot sun, but it's also one of the best indie experiences on your PlayStation 3 or PS Vita. The creation of Toronto-based developer Drinkbox Studios, *Guacamelee!* is a 2-D beat-'em-up platformer, in which new abilities give you access to new parts of a vivid, mazelike world. The genre is commonly known as "Metroidvania," and the game's influences become obvious after you break your first "Choozo" statue or run into the mosaic of Simon Belmont.

The game stars Juan Aguacate, a simple agave farmer whose life is turned upside-down when El Presidente's daughter is kidnapped by the skeletal Carlos Calaca, who wants to unite the land of the living and the land of the dead. With the help of a magical mask, Juan becomes a mighty luchador and sets out to save the world and get the girl.

While the plot may seem like total schlock — and to be fair, it is — that description doesn't do justice to the game's witty dialogue and anarchic sense of humour, akin to a grown-up *Paper Mario*. Most of the laughs come from timely references to popular culture, videogames or Internet memes. One poster in the city advertises a match between La Máscara (donning Majora's Mask) and Mega Hombre (that is, Mega Man). Another urges you to buy "Me Gusta Guavas." When teleporting to a different location, you're told, "No liquids over 3 oz."

But comedy leaks into the gameplay as well. Running down one hallway causes the camera to dramatically zoom in on Juan, only to pull back after you blindly stumble into a mass of enemies. When you're

first transformed into a feeble chicken, the game forces you into a mad flight from a mob you couldn't hope to beat. *Guacamelee!* is full of these clever moments, making it more than the wacky brawler it could have been.

Juan relies on strikes, throws and grappling moves for the most part, but gradually unlocks several colour-coded power attacks. These are required to break otherwise impenetrable obstacles and enemy shields; for example, the uppercut gives off a red flourish and breaks red shield and blocks. And as the land of the living and land of the dead overlap, he'll need to shift between them in order to hit enemies that attack from beyond the veil. The same mechanics are required for much of the platforming, which can actually be rather difficult and puzzling. Shifting will instantly change lava into water or make walls appear and disappear. At times *Guacamelee!* feels like an extreme version of *Portal*.

However, you may find yourself swapping dimensions just to admire the work Drinkbox Studios put into the world. The visuals throughout the game are crisp and stylized, characterized by a bold and sometimes garish use of colour. But switching to the land of dead brings out dark reprises of catchy tunes, changes atmospheric effects (like sending snow skyward) and brings a whole new cast of cadavers to talk to. The world isn't just fleshed out; it's fleshed out twice.

In a thematically appropriate move, there's no punishment for dying. Which is a godsend because of the stiff and consistent difficulty. While the challenge never crosses over into insurmountable for an experienced gamer, both platforming and combat become complicated and cluttered in the latter parts of the game. Crossing a room can require a precise chain of wall-jumps, double-jumps and power moves while simultaneously changing dimensions and dodging obstacles. A single group of enemies can possess mul-



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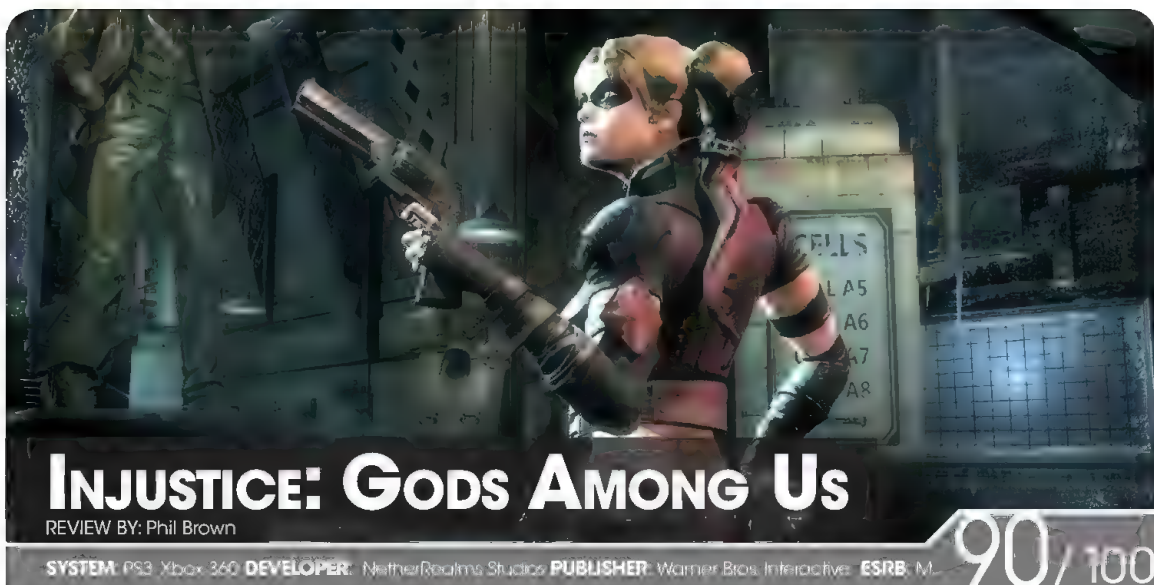


multiple shield types in both dimensions, meaning your attacks will usually strike only one at a time while they collectively pummel you. It's challenging, yes, but it can also become confusing and frustrating.

The difficulty can be greatly reduced by bringing in a friend, with Juan gaining a female counterpart in co-op mode. Multiplayer is a seamless drop in, drop out experience that never disrupts gameplay. It's impossible to become separated, even during some of the complex platforming, because you can teleport to the other player at any time.

Even if you go it alone, you can expect to complete normal mode in about five hours, with plenty of collectables and a smattering of lacklustre side-quests as additional diversions. The game is short — but that's a good thing, the result of quick pacing and a lack of monotonous padding. Clever, challenging and stylish, *Guacamelee!* is pure bone-crunching satisfaction. **CG**





INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US

REVIEW BY: Phil Brown

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360 DEVELOPER: NetherRealm Studios PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive ESRB: M

90/100



Finally the school yard arguments can be settled. Who would win in a fight between Batman and Wonder Woman?

Could the Flash run circles around Green Lantern? Would Doomsday really kill Superman in a rematch? *Injustice: Gods Among Us* might not send out the signal through its title to anyone other than the most dedicated DC fan, but this just might be the finest superhero fighting game to ever be created. I can already hear the screams of the *Marvel Vs. Capcom* faithful and as one of them myself, it's a tough call to make. I'd need a little more time dedicated to duking it out in *Injustice* to be certain, but at the very least NetherRealm have created a title that doesn't pale in comparison to the fighting game classic. Building off their remarkable *Mortal Kombat 2.0* engine to create something that combines traits from both the MK and Capcom franchises, the good folks at NetherRealm have created a beat-em-up that's actually worthy of the godly licensing. Before the game was even released the company hyped it as a potential franchise starter and after sampling the results, let's hope that isn't just talk.

From the moment you boot up the game it's clear that the design team benefited greatly from the success of their brilliant MK reboot. The graphics, menus, and general special move commands are similar, but once you start fighting, it's a whole other ball game. Fights take on the dizzying speed of a *Marvel Vs. Capcom* battle, each stage is amusingly interactive, and there isn't a drop of blood in sight. Capcom found the perfect pacing for a superhero fighting game back the arcade heyday and NetherRealm have adapted and refined it in a ludicrously entertaining way. If you're a button masher you can smash your way through enough combos and special moves to be competitive, but if you are an experienced fighter with dexterous fingers, you'll find your-

self controlling the DC icons through blazing battles that previously only took place in your dreams.

After the debacle that was *Mortal Kombat Vs. DC Universe*, it was fair to assume that there would be no fatalities in *Injustice*; however, NetherRealm came up with some amusing substitutes. They've provided a power meter that builds up based on attacks and hits that can be used in a few ways. Each character has unique special attacks tied to their superpower (eg, the Flash goes extra fast, Deathstroke pulls out his guns, etc.) that can be unleashed gradually, or if you save up all your power you can unleash an animated super move as over the top as it is devastating (Superman flies you to space before knocking you to earth, Batman shocks you before smacking you with the Batmobile). Ever since *Tatsunoko Vs. Capcom*, fighting game developers have been expanding and exaggerating their animated super moves and *Injustice* might just have whipped up some of the most grandiose yet and each one fits its character perfectly. There's only one super move per character at this point, which is a bit disappointing and suggests some DLC and sequel baiting. However, that's compensated for by the fact that levels themselves have built in super attacks. Time the right hit at the edge of a level and you'll send your opponent through an elaborate animated attack that ends in a new location (ex: hit someone through the wall at Arkham Asylum and they'll be beat up by Killer Croc, The Penguin, and Two Face before stumbling out the other side). These are ridiculously entertaining to watch and an addition to fighting game mechanics that should have been explored long ago. On top of that you can also grab items from the background of most levels to launch as character specific attacks, which is a nice touch.

As a fighting game, *Injustice* is a real treat and it also delivers as an excellent piece of fan service. Despite a few



wonky redesigns (I'm looking at you overly sexualized Harley Quinn) each and every one of the 24 DC characters is treated with the respect they deserve. Sure, we'd expect Superman to have all of his powers fully utilized in special moves, but for Solomon Grundy to be so lovingly rendered with clever designs like having him pull blade projectiles out of his body... well, that's a pleasant surprise. Even more of a shock is the fact that the story mode of *Injustice* is actually well worth playing. That's right, thanks to hiring a pair of DC comics scripting veterans Justin Gray and Jimmy Palmiotti, NeatherRealm have delivered arguably the most interesting narrative to any fighting game. There's a full two hours of animation here that's been lovingly rendered and when you add in the fights and occasional quicktime event mini-games, you could easily sink 4-5 hours into the story mode alone. The plot opens with the Joker unleashing a nuke in Metropolis that kills a vast number of heroes and civilians, eventually leading Superman to create a global totalitarian government (!). It's a bizarre set up, but if you're familiar with the DC universe, you'll know what the term multiverse means and can guess how the problem is solved. It's not exactly a Frank Miller or Grant Morrison yarn, but for a fighting game it's a surprisingly deep story with plenty of nods and in-jokes for fans as well as some surprising emotional resonance. Throw in a pounding orchestral score and a voice cast of animated Justice League veterans (including Kevin Conroy!) and you've got yourself something special. Story mode is usually the last thing anyone would voluntarily sample after buying a fighting game, but with *Injustice* I'd actually recommend going there first.

What's that? You want more content? Don't worry, *Injustice* has you covered. If you want to do an old school MK Tower battle, there's a Battle Mode complete with limited animation MK-style character endings and



Whether you're a fighting game fanatic or a DC comics obsessive, *Injustice: Gods Among Us* will scratch your itch just right.



over 20 variations (fight only villains, retain one health bar through multiple fights, etc.). Then there's S.T.A.R. labs filled with odd unlockable mini-tasks like the last *Mortal Kombat* game, a surprisingly detailed training mode that will show inexperienced fighting gamers how to master every character, and of course online multiplayer with all that implies. Whew! That's a hefty package for a fighting game, especially a debut entry in a new franchise.

There are of course complaints to be made: a few shoddy bits of animation here, a few missed move opportunities there. Thankfully, it's all stuff that falls into the nitpicking category and nothing that significantly hurts the game. Whether you're a fighting game fanatic or a DC comics obsessive, *Injustice: Gods Among Us* will scratch your itch just right. Fans of both were right to be apprehensive about the title given past dis-

appointments, but the good news is that *Injustice* delivers everything the developers promised. NetherRealm did such an impressive job on this and their *Mortal Kombat* reboot that it might even be time to dust off that old *Mortal Kombat Vs DC Universe* concept again. Now that the superheroes have animated super moves this entertaining to watch, a fatality substitute is in place that could make up for DC's insistence that their characters not get their hands bloody. I've got a feeling that fans will be battling it out in *Injustice* online for quite some time and with Lobo already announced and Martian Manhunter curiously absent, the DLC character lineup should be robust. *Injustice* is the fighting game the DC characters have long deserved and if NeatherRealm is committed to turning this heroic success into a franchise, well this just might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. **C&G**



STARCRAFT II: HEART OF THE SWARM

REVIEW BY: Brendan Frye

SYSTEM: PC, Mac DEVELOPER: Blizzard Entertainment PUBLISHER: Blizzard Entertainment ESRB: T

91 / 100

 Blizzard, with *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty*, brought the popular franchise to a new generation of gamers, keeping the core aspects that made the game great while improving on them in almost every way. *Heart of the Swarm* offers players more of what made *Wings of Liberty* so exciting and does it in a robust, well realized package, making it well worth its \$40 selling price.

The story picks up where *Wings of Liberty* left off. You take control of Sarah Kerrigan, leader of the now fractured Zerg, as she seeks revenge for all that was done to her. This is a much more personal story than seen in the original series. It is more about loss, love and honour than it is about political deception and betrayal. Much of what Blizzard have done with *Heart of the Swarm*'s story works, but some horrible dialogue and cheesy one liners do take away from the otherwise interesting space opera. The cinematics have also greatly improved: beautifully crafted, they show how Blizzard is at top of the heap when it comes to production. Watching the cinematics, I could not help but wonder why Blizzard has not made a feature film for the series. If ever a series deserved the 'trans-media' treatment, it would be *StarCraft*.

The multiplayer and campaign components of *StarCraft* have always felt like two very different yet appealing products in a single box. Never has that been more true than with *Heart of the Swarm*. The campaign eases players through a personal story while at the same time teaching the core fundamentals of the game. It plays fast and loose with balance and gives the player access to some truly powerful units. The multiplayer, on the other hand, is about speed, build order and balance. Each new addition will allow for new strategies yet nothing feels overpowered. It is clear that Blizzard spent time constructing a package that appeals to both audiences without compromising on either.

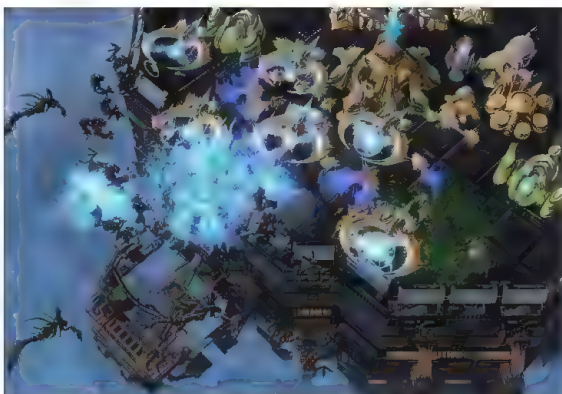
With a campaign packed with 24 missions and a selection of side missions, *Heart of the Swarm* is reminiscent of boxed expansion packs of the 90s rather than the fast snapshots of gameplay packed in most modern DLC. The missions feel easier this time around. A seasoned player will want to crank up the difficulty since normal poses no real challenge. The diversity in gameplay compared to *Wings of Liberty*, however, is a welcome touch for experienced gamers. There was never a time that a mission felt like it was dragging on. When there were tedious tasks that needed to be fulfilled, Blizzard found interesting ways to keep the gameplay fresh and enjoyable.

The overall experience has not changed much from *Wings of Liberty*. The missions are sectioned off into a series of planetary scenarios all with their own unique flavour. Each section earns you rewards: new units, along with new points that can be spent levelling up Kerrigan's specific abilities in an RPG style system, as she is an important 'hero unit' within the game. There are also a series of unit specific missions that the player can undertake which award special abilities to individual units. These missions act as more of a tutorial for the new abilities than any kind of challenge. Still, it was nice to be able to test abilities before committing to a specific path. It is a pity, however, that these units cannot be used in unranked games against real people, as they do provide for some interesting gameplay options. Although this is understandable since they would break the balance of play in favour of the Zerg.

The fundamental way the Zerg work when compared to other races makes the single player move at a much faster rate than the one found in *Wings of Liberty*. The Zerg are a race built for speed and each upgrade through the campaign helps make everything faster, from mining to spawning. It felt like there was never



Blizzard sets the bar of quality and polish a little higher with each game.



a wait to get into the action, with the constant churning out of units keeping the player constantly engaged. This feels like a much more streamlined campaign, making the overall single player experience more fun.

As good as the single player offering may be, it would mean nothing if something was done to hinder the multiplayer experience. It is great to see Blizzard put as much, if not more, time into this section of the package. *Heart of the Swarm* delivers on all accounts when it comes to multiplayer. Never has *StarCraft* felt more polished and well developed. The new units fit well into how all the races play. They complement the already existing arsenal rather than rework a much loved existing formula.

The new units help each race strengthen its weaknesses yet never give anyone the upper hand. From the early game support unit, "the Oracle" to the siege like nature of "the Swarm Host", it is clear that Blizzard has spent a great deal of time tweaking the balance of multiplayer. The fundamental way the game is played will be changed; gone are the old strategies! They are replaced with the possibility of new and exciting matches. It is easy to see why *StarCraft* has become the de facto RTS of choice for major league gaming competitions.

It is refreshing to see that Blizzard is not happy resting on its laurels and kept pushing to make the experiences better for the fans. Since 'the early days' of *Warcraft*, they have been improving on what makes RTS games fun, and *Heart of the Swarm* shows all the care that Blizzard has put in to this cause. The multiplayer system has also improved. The ability to jump into a game has never been easier with the matchmaking system. All the changes mean you will be scrolling through menus less and playing more, which is always a good thing.

StarCraft is not a game that is easy to jump into when it comes to multiplayer. Many of the people online are good and this can make new players feel overwhelmed easily, even with the smart matchmaking. This is why the training included in *Heart of the Swarm* is such a welcome addition. This training allows you to get your feet wet a section at a time, getting the ins and outs of short cuts and what to build when, in order to get your base working fast. I found myself learning new things about the game and I have played *StarCraft* since the first game hit store shelves more than ten years ago!

Blizzard sets the bar of quality and polish a little higher with each game. *Heart of the Swarm* is no different. It is packed with hours of gameplay in single player and even more once you dive into the multiplayer. The new content secures *StarCraft's* place as the pinnacle of the RTS genre. It will be exciting to see how Blizzard tops it with the final expansion in the series, and what new surprises they still have up their sleeves. It is a must buy for any fan of the series! **C&G**



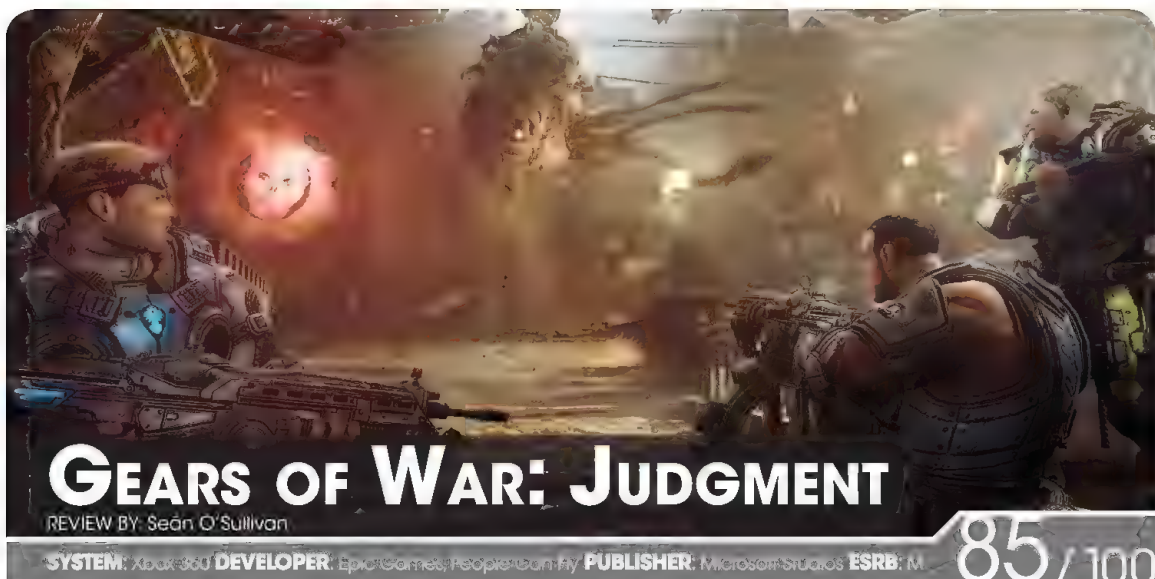


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 *Gears of War 3* was a rarity in blockbuster games, in that its ending provided a sense of closure. Epic's decision to shut the door is understandable; over the course of two sequels, the successful formula was polished, tweaked, and embellished upon until the law of diminishing returns could be staved off no longer. Considering that the franchise seemed to run its course, it seemed unnecessary that *Bulletstorm* developer People Can Fly were tasked with creating a prequel, particularly considering the anemic plot. Thankfully, the game makes clear within the first ten minutes that it's not content to merely emulate the gameplay of its numbered source material.

Judgment focuses on the exploits of series regulars Baird and Cole 14 years before the events of the first game, and a mere month after the Locust forces have sprung from underground and begun their attack on humankind. Baird's squad is being court martialled for treason in the midst of a warzone by the psychotic General Loomis, and the story unfolds in flashbacks as each member gives their testimony.

If you're concerned that this pre-*Gears 1* setting means that People Can Fly are beholden to the franchise's canon, fret not. Enemies and weapons from *Gears 2* and *3* are thrown into the fray immediately, and the characters under your control have some new tricks at their disposal. The most immediate change is the control scheme - you have a button to toggle between two weapons, and a button for throwing grenades. It's hard to get excited about this on paper, but not having to futz around with a D-Pad makes weapon switching brainless, and grenades much more useful.

After the first major skirmish, Cole exclaims "I ain't never seen so many grubs in one place before!" A sentiment that surely reflects the player's own internal state thanks to how frequently *Judgment* drops you into long



HOLY SHIT



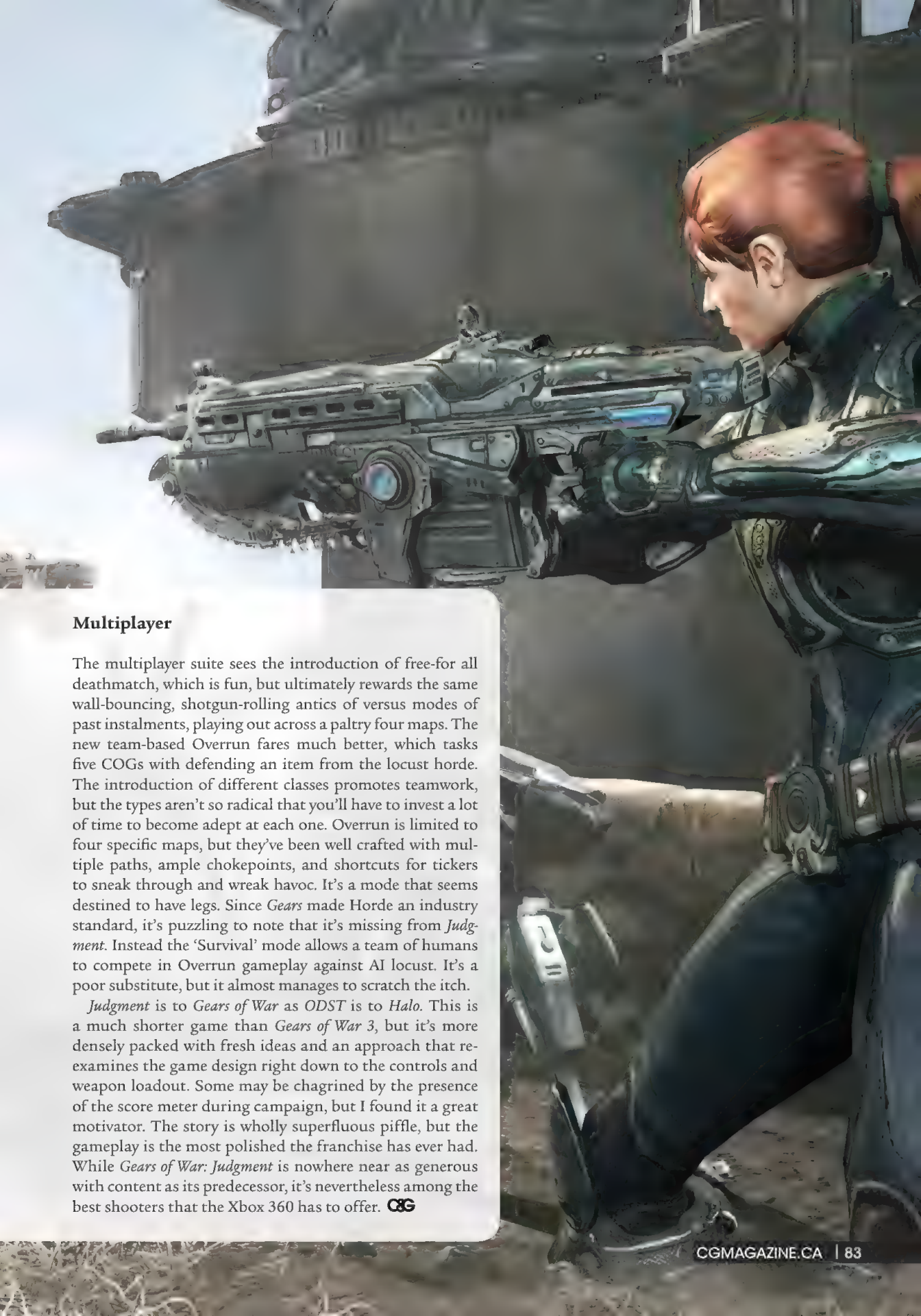
battlefields teeming with dozens of enemies of various types and sizes. Zoom in on a slowly encroaching boomer for too long and you might find yourself swarmed with fast-moving tickers and wretches. The sheer variety of enemies bearing down on your squad at any one time necessitates the constant presence of four COGs, and ensures that coop sessions won't be dominated by the one guy with the most skills. When you inevitably fail a session, the battle will unfold differently on your retry, thanks to the semi-random enemy spawning system.

The five-six hour campaign eschews much of the standard ways of introducing novelty that previous titles used. There are no sections dedicated to vehicles or turrets, and the old canard of splitting up the team on divergent paths has also (happily) fallen by the wayside. The freshness here is somewhat more organic, coming from the available weapons and scenarios that the COGs are thrust into. It's clear that the developers have taken inspiration from the heyday of World War II shooters, as two of the newly introduced weapons consist of bolt-action rifles, and many levels place emphasis on driving forward into fortified positions on higher ground. This is taken to its natural conclusion in a campaign highlight that's a clear homage to the Normandy Beach landing.

As great as the 'vanilla' experience is, the true masterstroke is the scoring metagame, anchored by the 'declassified' missions. At the beginning of each section, players can activate a modifier that materially

affects how the next section will unfold. Sometimes it forces a less than ideal loadout, other times it has the enemy attacking from front and back, and it introduces brand new concepts to the franchise (disabling regenerative health, introducing heavy winds that knock projectiles off course, and visibility hampering effects.) Rolling through one of the most densely populated battlefields with four players armed only with meat-cleavers might just be one of the funniest co-op experiences available this generation. It's a thoroughly addictive addition, and an ingenious way to further stretch the *Gears* formula under the narrative conceit that these are details omitted from the official reports. Declassified missions are such fun that their exclusion from the Aftermath chapter (set during *Gears 3*) causes it to pale in comparison.

Judgment is a technical marvel, despite not offering a major graphical leap from the last installment. Even during the quiet moments, the graphics captivate; the night sky is lit up with tracer fire from distant battles, orange flames throw out a natural glow, and sunbeams convincingly pierce through dusty rooms. In the thick of the action, the preponderance of enemies, particles and gibs will never cause slowdown, but rather some screen-tearing; an elegant choice that means the controls are always responsive. The end of action reports for each section, and pre-rendered cut scenes between missions mask load times, and restarting from a checkpoint scarcely takes a second, so it's easy to stay engrossed for hours at a time.



Multiplayer

The multiplayer suite sees the introduction of free-for all deathmatch, which is fun, but ultimately rewards the same wall-bouncing, shotgun-rolling antics of versus modes of past instalments, playing out across a paltry four maps. The new team-based Overrun fares much better, which tasks five COGs with defending an item from the locust horde. The introduction of different classes promotes teamwork, but the types aren't so radical that you'll have to invest a lot of time to become adept at each one. Overrun is limited to four specific maps, but they've been well crafted with multiple paths, ample chokepoints, and shortcuts for tickers to sneak through and wreak havoc. It's a mode that seems destined to have legs. Since *Gears* made Horde an industry standard, it's puzzling to note that it's missing from *Judgment*. Instead the 'Survival' mode allows a team of humans to compete in Overrun gameplay against AI locust. It's a poor substitute, but it almost manages to scratch the itch.

Judgment is to *Gears of War* as *ODST* is to *Halo*. This is a much shorter game than *Gears of War 3*, but it's more densely packed with fresh ideas and an approach that re-examines the game design right down to the controls and weapon loadout. Some may be chagrined by the presence of the score meter during campaign, but I found it a great motivator. The story is wholly superfluous piffle, but the gameplay is the most polished the franchise has ever had. While *Gears of War: Judgment* is nowhere near as generous with content as its predecessor, it's nevertheless among the best shooters that the Xbox 360 has to offer. **CG**



*A fun, flawed,
and ultimately
forgettable
experience.*



ARMY OF TWO: THE DEVIL'S CARTEL

REVIEW BY: Ustad Khaira

SYSTEM: PS3, Xbox 360 **DEVELOPER:** Visceral Montreal, EA Montreal **PUBLISHER:** EA **ESRB:** M

65/100

It's pretty obvious just by reading the title that *Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel* is meant to be played with a friend. You and your friend (or AI partner if you decide to go about this game alone) will work your way through each scenario, for the most part, together, and that's the best part about this game. Playing with a friend is enjoyable; figuring out who is going to draw fire and who is going to flank (as well as why one of you keeps dying) can result in some heated argument. This all adds up nicely on paper and should result in a good game. Unfortunately, *The Devil's Cartel* falls flat in some other key areas.

The chief of those problems is that the game suffers from an identity crisis. *Army of Two* and its sequel *The 40th Day*, found a happy medium between over the top violence/destruction and over the top (and often hilariously lame) humour. The two main characters of those games, Elliot Salem and Tyson Rios, could high five each other in the middle of play or air guitar after an intense gunfight, adding to the feel that this game knew it was a parodying the genre.

The Deal

In *The Devil's Cartel*, it feels like the developers weren't sure what they wanted this game to be. The one-liners aren't as common (and aren't nearly as funny, or so bad you can't help but laugh) and the story takes itself more seriously. The entirety of the game takes place in Mexico, (ranging from the streets of Mexico to the buildings of Mexico and the tunnels of Mexico) your enemies comprised entirely of Cartel goons. Salem and Rios take the back seat for most the game, with players controlling a pair known only as Alpha and Bravo. You begin the game escorting a politician wanted by the Cartel leader, things go south and chaos ensues from there.

That's pretty much all the plot you need to know.

There is an interesting but completely predictable twist halfway through the story (so predictable that the characters actually mention they should have seen it coming) but aside from that it's pretty by the numbers. You'll work with the Salem and Rios for a little while, run into other members of your organization, T.W.O, often ending with death, but much of the game is Alpha and Bravo going about things themselves.

Alpha and Bravo are, unfortunately, just as generic as characters as their names would have you believe. One is your textbook tough guy wanting to run into danger, the other a little more cautious in how he approaches things. I won't hold up Salem and Rios as the bastions of videogame characters but at the very least they had distinct voices, with Salem having the benefit of being voiced by Nolan North. Alpha and Bravo sound far too similar, and it wasn't until the last third of the game that I could tell which voice was which because neither stands out.

Speaking of Nolan North, he does not return to his role in this game, which is a shame because I thought that character had an interesting arc during this story. That's not to say the new actor does a poor job, his delivery is fine. It is just very noticeable that the actor has changed since the voices aren't at all similar.

Having said all that, there is very little fundamentally wrong with the way this game plays. The shooting is near identical to the previous titles in the series and most third person shooters on the market. The cover mechanic is troublesome though. A single button is used to snap your character into cover (much like everywhere else) but the game doesn't seem to understand where you want to go. A very small indicator will pop up on screen signifying where your next destination will be, but it's hit or miss whether



or not you can get the icon to where you need it. You can have your character standing right beside a wall and the game won't get that you want to duck under it. Sometimes it will decide you meant to run right through a hail of gunfire and grenades to take cover behind a car right beside your enemies. When it works, it's competent. But it rarely ever works.

Play long enough and your Overkill meter fills, letting you unleash a rain of bullets without being vulnerable to return fire. With Overkill activated the game slows down, letting you get a feel for where everybody is before taking them out. Limbs will rip apart and blood will spray in all directions while in Overkill.

Perhaps the best part of *The Devil's Cartel* is the customization options. Much like in the first two games, you can upgrade your weapons to increase the clip size, add a scope, silencer or a grenade launcher. You can also just make cosmetic changes to your weapons and characters to change the colour of your gun, change the style of your mask and attire. I can't tell you how motivated I was to unlock and buy a specific mask. It's meaningless overall in terms of how the game plays, but it's the small things like this that generally add to the overall enjoyment of a game.

●

Even when something marginally interesting happened, it was surrounded by so much mediocrity, it didn't feel like it mattered.

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All of this can be done by spending the money you earn after each mission. That money is earned based on how you perform in each mission. You'll get money for the obvious things like kills and headshots, but you can earn bonus dollars for headshots and melee kills along with taking down tougher enemies like brutes or (most importantly) working as a team.

If you don't have a co-op partner to play with the allied AI won't hold you down. When you're injured the AI will come to your aid and is generally smart with how it goes about eliminating your foes. The same can't be said for the enemy AI though. At times they'll just stay in one spot and wait for you to come up and end their life with a satisfying melee kill. Other times they'll just blindly lob grenades. If you run into a big group in a constrained area you'll have some difficulty progressing, that's about as hard as this game gets.

Falling Short

In the end though this is not a bad game, it just feels soulless. It doesn't know what it wants to be. *The Devil's Cartel* ditched the self-aware parody feeling of the first two titles and tried moving towards a more serious tone, but then pulled it back to the comedy slightly,

and that didn't work. *Army of Two* now feels like it's trying to please fans of all genres to broaden the potential audience, but ultimately fails when it comes to standing out at anything.

I didn't care much about what was happening on screen, didn't have a personal attachment to any of the new characters introduced. Even when something marginally interesting happened, it was surrounded by so much mediocrity, it didn't feel like it mattered. The game teases another sequel at the end, but if that game ever comes to fruition (and I doubt it will anytime soon), whoever heads up that project needs to re-evaluate what *Army of Two* is and should be, and where *The Devil's Cartel* fell short.

If you can find a friend to play with (whether online or split-screen) this game can be fun. Look past the generic story and bland characters and just enjoy the co-op. That's the way to play this game. But just because something is fun doesn't mean it's good. This game feels lost, not knowing exactly what it wants to be, and is forgettable at the end of the day. It's sure to be a let-down to most fans of the first two games, and fans of the genre at large. There are better third person shooters available, seek those out. **CG**



GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION

REVIEW BY: Wayne Santos

SYSTEM: PS3 DEVELOPER: SCE Santa Monica PUBLISHER: SCE ESRB: M

80/100



Revisiting The Rage

The tale of Kratos came to a pretty definitive conclusion with *God of War III*, but naturally, with a series this successful, it's hard for Sony to walk away. As a result, we once more travel to the past of the god/family/everyone else killer to get a little more insight into what drives a man to such extremes. Mind you, we've already had two PSP games that did exactly the same thing, but those weren't done by the "studio prime," Sony Santa Monica itself. Those were pretty good, but not necessarily essential additions to the *God of War* franchise. Does the home team do any better? Actually, no.

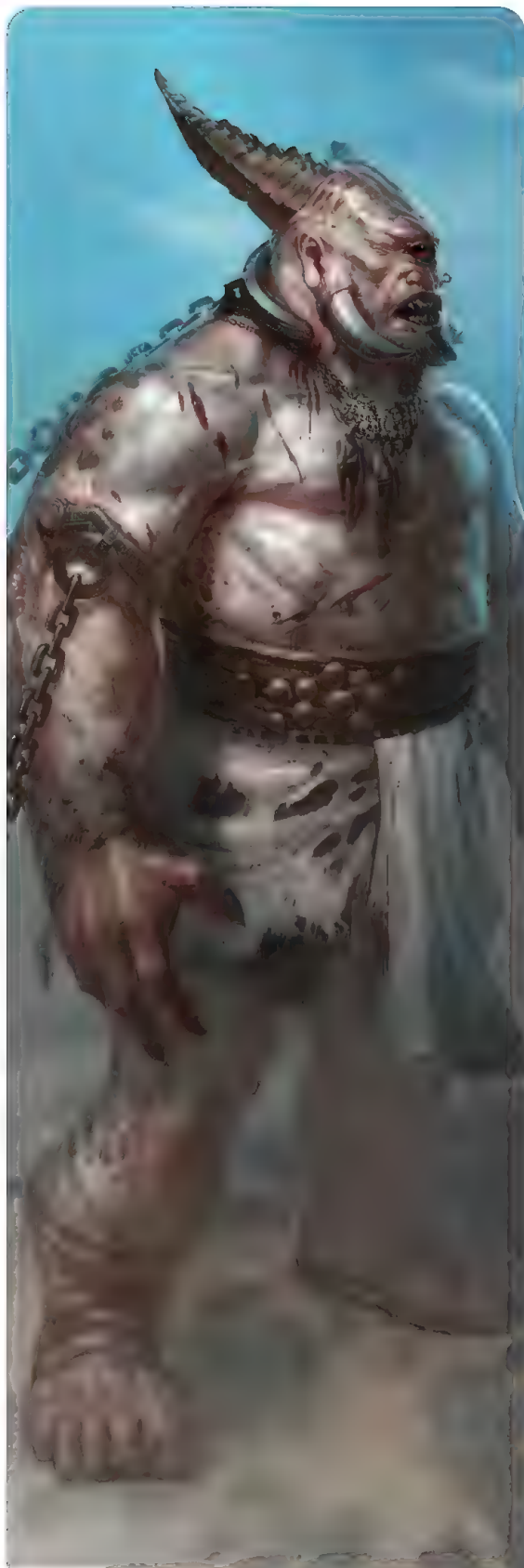
Anger Management Ad Nauseum

With *God of War III* leaving no way forward, the obvious thing to do is go back, so we've got our first retail disc prequel with *Ascension*. The events here seem to take place shortly before the original *God of War* as Kratos attempts to leave behind his service to Ares and is punished by the Furies for breaking an oath to a god. As with *Chains of Olympus* and *Ghost of Sparta*, *Ascension* can't really do anything to change continuity and instead attempts to shed a little bit more emotional nuance on Kratos' eventual quest for vengeance by revealing more of the circumstances that add fuel to his raging fire. There are some nice character moments for Kratos here, but ultimately the story doesn't actually add anything significant to the mythos. Like the PSP games, this feels like a side-story; nice, but hardly as compelling or satisfying as his crusade against the Olympians.

What no one is going to be arguing about though is the level of graphical polish on show with this game. As with *God of War II*, *Ascension* shows Sony Santa Monica at the height of their mastery with a console in its twi-

light, and it's difficult to imagine that any future games are going to push the hardware as hard, or be so technically impressive. Once again, Santa Monica manages to keep a consistent frame rate, with no screen tearing and some amazing battles taking place in a shifting, moving environment. The art team has gone to town with the most detailed characters and creatures and some nice, colourful environments that carry the now trademark epic vistas that the *God of War* series loves to occasionally throw out to remind people they're in a playground of classic Greek mythology, gross liberties with source material notwithstanding. This is one of those titles that shows how, in the hands of the pros, the current generation still has a lot of life left in it, though the law of diminishing returns makes it likely that we won't see any future releases surpass the technical proficiency on show here. This, and games like *Beyond* or the *The Last of Us* are probably as good as it's going to get, the PS3's ceiling is now in sight.

When it comes to the audio, things are par for course with *God of War: Ascension*. That is to say, the usual high standards have been achieved with few surprises. As to be expected from a GOW game, this is a sub-woofer friendly title that will shake walls when the volume is cranked up as titanic monsters roar and buildings crumble. The music is still an evocative mix of hysterical orchestra with wailing chorus and more subdued tracks with classic Greek instrumentation, though ignorant players might erroneously think they are "ripping off *Battlestar Galactica*." One unexpected surprise is the voice acting. Although T.C. Carson returns to voice Kratos, he actually gets to exercise his acting chops a little bit more in this instalment, doing far more than just shouting, "ATHENA! ZEUS! ARES! YOU WILL



PAY,” all the time. Some of the flashbacks call for a human side to Kratos that requires him to speak at normal volume and it’s a nice change to see Kratos acting in a fatherly manner and actually reinforcing that he had something worth losing.

A Return To The Last Generation

In some ways, the most surprising thing about *God of War: Ascension* is how much it feels like the original *God of War*. The series has always juggled a trio of gaming mechanics in the form of melee combat, some platforming/traversal, and puzzle solving. The ratio of these elements has changed somewhat over the years, with *God of War III* definitely erring far more on combat than either traversal or puzzles. This time around, the distribution is more even, with many more puzzles cropping up, and quite a lot of clambering about for Kratos to do in between fights. And while all this sounds good on paper, it never quite gels together as a cohesive whole. It’s not that *Ascension* is a bad game, far from it, in fact. But it never reaches the same heights of mind blowing *epic* that previous games achieved. Part of that is simply familiarity with the franchise and the other part—however unfair—is the prequel nature of the game removing any uncertainty from the proceedings about where this is all headed.

Looking at it mechanically, there are notable changes that sometimes improve and sometimes hinder the experience. Combat has received a significant tweak, with more subtlety thrown in. The basic engine and combos remain the same, so the essential “feel” of GOW combat is intact, but now Kratos can switch between various elemental types of damage on his blades with a push of the D-pad. Grappling has changed so that Kratos can perform the move at range, as well as execute damaging—but not fatal—grapples to add more variety to the combat. Perhaps most welcome of all is the addition of more interactivity to finishing moves, allowing Kratos to pummel foes and dodge their incoming, dying attacks as he struggles to execute them. All of these additions make combat feel a little bit different without diverging too much from the established style.

On the other hand, Sony Santa Monica fell victim to the Ubisoft error of “more is more.” Where *Assassin’s Creed 3* weighed itself down with too much pointless real estate and meaningless side-quests, *Ascension* throws in more combat than it needs to. It feels like a game from previous console generations where exits are blocked off as Kratos enters a new area and wave after wave after wave after wave after yet another wave and still more waves and then one more wave for good measure and... what should we put here? Heck, *another* wave, are what dominate the play. It’s almost like over-compensation on Sony Santa Monica’s part to “apologize” for the stretches of traversal and puzzle solving that might have bored the action junkies, so they go overboard when combat does finally take place.

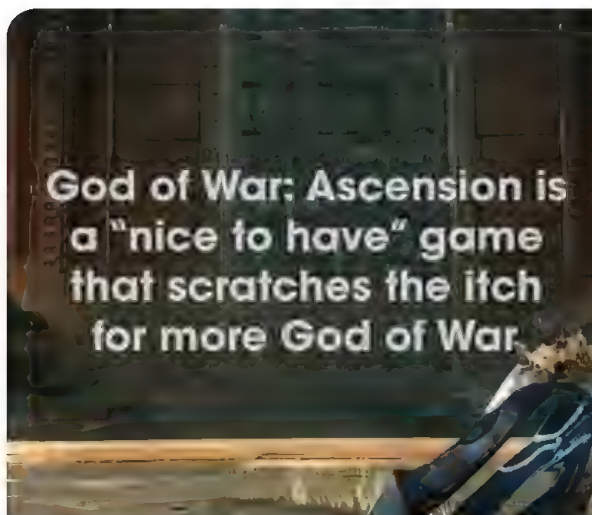
Another curious tweak is the way *Ascension* insists on proving that the amazing environmental changes are taking place in real time. It does this by frequently pulling the camera back in the middle of combat to show what changes are taking place in the world. On the one hand, this is more proof of Sony Santa Monica's technical mastery. On the other, it's extremely hard to "read" a fight you're in the middle of when you're a teeny pile of pixels surrounded by other pixels atop a giant statue in the middle of moving itself around.

The puzzles on the other hand, are nothing but a vast improvement. Some of them are quite clever and while experienced adventure gamers will probably appreciate the intricacy, more action oriented players could potentially hurl controllers at the wall, or, to save money, just fall back on a walkthrough or FAQ somewhere online. It was quite refreshing to see puzzles get the same time in the spotlight as they enjoyed in the original *God of War* although they occasionally felt like they had no context within the story or environment and were placed there simply for the sake of it, rather than unlocking a new area or advancing the plot in some way. Traversal hasn't changed much, at least in its climbing aspects, but there's also a lot of sliding now, which, like combat, feels overused after the umpteenth floor caves under Kratos and he dodges left and right while sliding down to a new level. Like the combat, there are moments where some puzzles and traversal aspects are truly brilliant on their own, but the frequency with which they appear lessens the impact and makes the game feel a little padded out.

What does not feel padded out, surprisingly, is multiplayer. For the first time a *God of War* game has an online multiplayer component, and for the most part, it works. It looks like Sony Santa Monica was paying close attention to *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale*, because despite the more serious, steroid enhanced Greek aesthetic, it's still basically a multi-level, third person brawler with people using melee and special attacks against each other in team matches and free-for-alls. The slower,

less antic combat of *GOW* translates extremely well to an online competitive arena, giving players a chance to read moves and counterattack, while not overly taxing the network requirements. Players also gain XP for kills and achieving certain milestones, which can then be spent on buying new skills and upgrading equipment. There's even two-player co-op play in the tradition of *Gears of War* Horde mode, which can be played in single player as well for people that want to grind out XP to power up their characters. There's longevity in this multiplayer, it's well thought out and a lot of fun, though it remains to be seen whether a community stays and sustains it in the weeks after release.

All in all, *God of War: Ascension* is a "nice to have" game that scratches the itch for more *God of War* without doing anything to advance the series. It feels like a big budget version of the PSP games, even suffering from some of the same weaknesses as those titles like relying too much on repeating waves of combat. On the other hand, some of the set-piece action sequences—while not as jaw dropping thanks to familiarity—show an amazing mastery of the PS3 that can still impress. The multiplayer component is surprisingly fun, and might be another reason to keep the disc spinning in your machine. *God of War* fans can safely buy this and count on enjoying it, though perhaps not loving it. Others who have never played the series may be more awestruck with the action, though the increased frequency of puzzles may grate on less patient nerves. A fun, if uneven package. **C&G**



God of War: Ascension is a "nice to have" game that scratches the itch for more God of War



POKÉMON MYSTERY DUNGEON: GATES TO INFINITY

REVIEW BY: Scott Dixon

SYSTEM: 3DS DEVELOPER: Chunsoft PUBLISHER: Nintendo ESRB: E

55/100

For a series that has consistently been successful with its iterative design philosophy, I find it strange that *Pokémon Mystery Dungeon* was so profoundly disappointing. Maybe the formula has run its course and the series has nothing to look forward to besides B-tier games made by A-team developers. More likely the case is that *Gates to Infinity* is just an instance of missing the mark. More *Pokémon* games will come, and this little mistake will eventually be covered up by bigger and better releases.

Two distinct game types are being blended in *Gates*. The token *Pokémon* is in full force, and well executed. The counter-part in the mashup, the *Mystery Dungeon* rogue-like does not fare as well. This is the classic case of two great tastes ultimately not tasting great together.

While the concept of an action RPG looks great in

your mind's eye, the first hour of *Gates to Infinity* serve to plant our expectations firmly back on solid land. What could have been exciting is relegated to tedium, and any semblance of story is simply shoehorned into a setting that doesn't even make me want to ask for an explanation. If a story driven game can't convince me to care in the first couple of hours – there are problems.

The real issue is that this game shows its target age more than any of its predecessors. While players of any age can enjoy many of the *Pokémon* titles, *Gates to Infinity* is so firmly entrenched in the 8-14 range that most players above that age will find it cringingly difficult to stick with beyond the introduction.

It's unfortunate, but just hold out until a better *Pokémon* game comes along, or just play *Luigi's Mansion*. **CG**



MASS EFFECT 3: CITADEL

REVIEW BY: Usaid Khaira

SYSTEM: PC, PS3, Xbox 360 DEVELOPER: BioWare PUBLISHER: EA ESRB: M

90/100

From the get-go it's very clear that *Mass Effect 3's Citadel* is all about closure. Being the last piece of content BioWare will put out involving Commander Shepard and the crew of the *Normandy*, it isn't about the Reapers and the fight to save all life, or appeasing fans that are still dissatisfied by the ending. In fact, *Citadel* does nothing to change any of the end-game content.

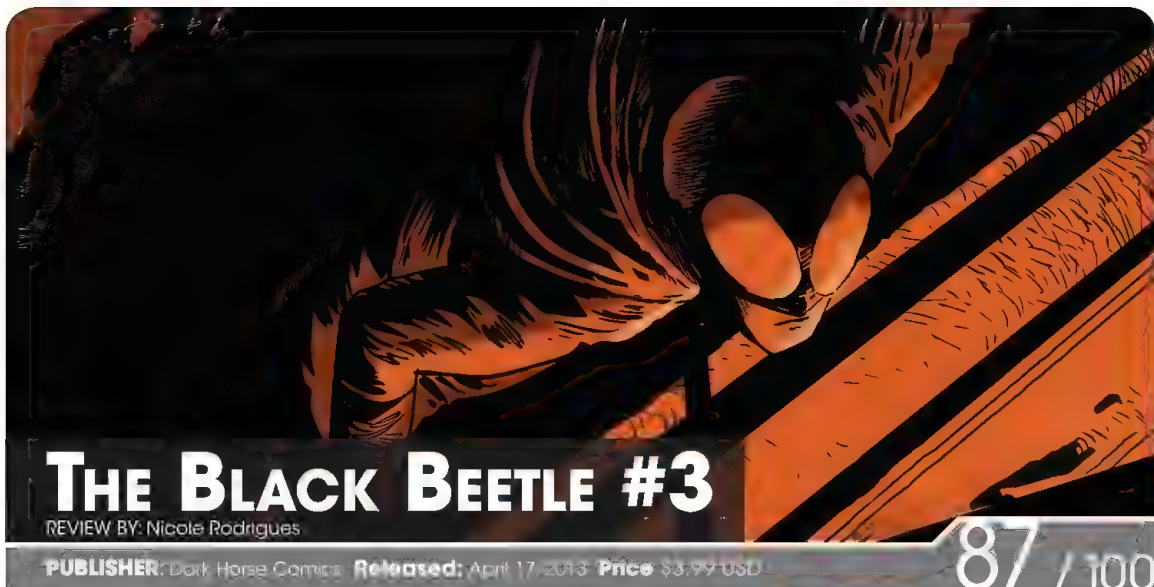
The plot set-up for *Citadel* is simple, Admiral Hackett orders the crew of the *Normandy* to take a shore leave on the Citadel, one he feels is far overdue and will give the ship time to be repaired before going back into battle. Before Shepard can get the chance to begin enjoying his time away from the war he is attacked by a group of mercenaries eager to end his life. You'll be joined by friends new and old (Wrex fans will be happy to see his return)

in the battles to find the motivation behind this group.

That's all there really is to it. The story isn't the strongest this series has put out in these downloadable plots, but that isn't the reason to play this. The tone of *Citadel* is so much lighter than the rest of *Mass Effect 3*, it turns out to be a fun, often hilarious, and poignant goodbye to the characters we've all come to love.

Once the main story is done, *Citadel* shifts focus to throwing a party for all your friends. It's here, speaking to your brothers and sisters-in-arms for what you know will be the last time, that *Citadel* best does its job.

Forget what you thought of the series' much talked about ending, play *Citadel* to remember the good times. Call your crew together, have a few drinks, and say goodbye to Commander Shepard for the last time. **CG**



Few series out there today are handled entirely by one creator. The Black Beetle is a creation of Francesco Francavilla, writer and illustrator of this series that's caused quite the stir amongst fans. A recent Eisner winner for Best Cover Artist, Francavilla originally published the adventures of the Black Beetle in his Pulp Sunday blog before Dark Horse picked it up for in print. It's a testament to his work that Dark Horse has let Francavilla run solo with this book, and it's paid off: *The Black Beetle* may be one of the best titles out this year.

"When Colt City cries out for justice, there's one man who will answer the call..." That man is the Black Beetle, our hero who has retained his aura of mystery even in issue #3 of the series. We know he's a force for good, keeping Colt City safe from threats both mob-based and potentially supernatural. He's investigating the death of a local mobster in this issue, which has led him to the Coco Club and in turn, the gorgeous and incredibly talented singer Ava Sheridan. A little bit of undercover flirtation here balances out the severity of past issues, what with all the murder and crime fighting. It's only a momentary distraction though, as the Black Beetle spots someone who should be dead leaving the club and gives chase. Of course, that lands him in even more trouble, and that's just the beginning.

Not only does Francavilla weave a thrilling, noir mystery, the artwork in this series is superb. The colour palette is a punch in the face with awesome, mixing, contrasting hues in a way that works really well, even though they really shouldn't. His stylized yet dynamic imagery showcases movement in a natural way, and his splash pages are always jaw dropping scenes that fit into the story as perfectly as they stand alone as art pieces. Many artists are able to create iconic moments in a comic, but out of context, they aren't necessar-

ily something you could mount and put on your wall. Most of Francavilla's pages tell a story within themselves, no context required. That allows him to convey a lot with little to no dialogue, as evidenced in the Intermezzo in this issue.

On the subject of the Intermezzo, it's great to see some traditionally European elements worked into a mainstream comic. The tone and pacing is part of what makes a series like *The Black Beetle* stand out; more traditional, nostalgic story-telling that feels like a killer cross between a 40s detective film and a 60s Italian novella. With superheroes. And magic. What more could you ask for? **C&G**





I try not to judge books by their cover but with Robyn Hood vs. Red Riding Hood's unevenly drawn, scantily clad heroines battling on the cover of this one-shot, I had my doubts before I even flipped a page. Grimm Fairy Tales is a Zenescope staple, a collection of re-imagined fairy tale characters, heavily weighted towards super sexy female characters who also bring the violence in these modern retellings. Even ignoring the hyper-sexualization of these fabled characters, the art, redesign, and new origins simply did nothing for me. So, I am admittedly not the most unbiased person to review this book. That being said, I think that fans of this series will really enjoy Robyn Hood vs. Red Riding Hood.

It's a decent enough setup for these two to battle, with Red Riding Hood deciding to track down Robyn Hood for her past misdeeds. No, not the rebellion that usurped King John's throne in the Myst realm, it seems there were also some murders back here on Earth that Robyn is responsible for. I'm sure fans of Robyn know all about her motivations for these grisly killings, but new fans will also learn what happened by the end of this crossover. Pat Shand treads the line between laying the characters history out for readers and leaving mystery well, though both leads read very similar and their motivations and story are oversimplified. Shand spends time in the story with each heroine to give them some depth but there are not really any surprises in these women's back-story. However, there are lots of action-packed panels to make up for it.

After a gratuitous costume change scene with Red, we meet Robyn and the action starts shortly thereafter. These two are evenly matched, so the fights are not one sided, although they can be confusing at times. Some panels cut too quickly from one pose to another: not usually a problem but in this case they are so differ-

ent, it's hard to tell what happened in between. Good action scenes are smooth and readers' minds fill in any blanks that may exist. Struggling to figure out how one character escaped another's grasp without any visual cues beforehand throws off the pacing of the book. It happened a few times in this issue, along with some clumsy looking sword fighting, so while there was a lot of action, it wasn't always very well done.

Overall, this book brings no surprises to the Grimm Fairy Tales universe but I don't think that was really the point. Having Robyn Hood and Red Riding Hood face off was obviously fan service, and it succeeds at that. If you're a regular reader of this series, I think you'll be satisfied. If you're not, I doubt you'll lose sleep if you pass on Robyn Hood vs. Red Riding Hood. **CG**





HAWKEYE: My Life As A Weapon

REVIEW BY: Adam Chapman

PUBLISHER: Marvel Comics Released: March 19, 2013 Price \$18.99 CAD

95/100

Hawkeye is without a doubt one of the strongest books currently being published by Marvel Comics. It's a superhero book that never feels like one, as it takes the Avenger Hawkeye and tells a very street-level tale, full of humour and pathos, of bad decisions and good intentions. Matt Fraction's take on Clint Barton is that of a well-intentioned screw-up, who routinely finds himself in some dangerous and ridiculous situations, while at the same time looking out for the little guy, whether it be his neighbours or even a dog. The script is fast-paced and breezy, a light-hearted romp, reminiscent of a 70s film in New York City.

Fraction does a tremendous job giving life to Clint Barton, and truly fleshing out the friendship and partnership which exists between Clint and Kate Bishop, otherwise known as the Hawkeye of the Young Avengers. This trade paperback, besides collecting *Hawkeye* #1-5, also includes *Young Avengers Presents* #6, which chronicles the first true meeting between Kate and Clint (I say first true meeting because they previously met when Clint was practicing with Captain America's shield and temporarily wearing Captain America's costume- Kate didn't realize that it was Clint at that point in time). The relationship between the two is a major highlight of this collection, as Clint clearly doesn't know how to interact and properly train his protégé, but he does his best at it. I like that although Clint is ostensibly the mentor, their actual working relationship is much more even, if not weighted in the

other direction, with Kate often seeming much more measured and mature than Clint.

As solid and as enjoyable as the script by Fraction is, it's hard to imagine this book with a different team handling the artwork. David Aja is the best partner that Fraction could have asked for on this book, as he proves that his prior success partnering with Fraction on *Immortal Iron Fist* wasn't accidental. David Aja has an incredible sense of style and pacing, but at the core of it is the fact that his work here feels like he is channelling the immortal David Mazzuchelli, of *Daredevil: Born Again* and *Batman Year One* fame. The similar storytelling sensibilities are

clearly evident, and he's found a match made in heaven in the form of colour artist Matt Hollingsworth. The panel work, the design of the panels and the construction of the characters, it's simply spectacular. Javier Pulido steps in to illustrate issues #4-5, and thanks to Hollingsworth not a beat is missed. Pulido has a different sensibility, but it's similar enough that you don't have a jarring change in the artwork (again, partly thanks to Hollingsworth's consistent colours), plus he makes some good artistic choices which

The panel work,
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are fun to look at.

This book is a must-read for almost anybody. It's a superhero comic without always feeling like it, it's a good-natured fun read that is immensely charming and appealing. Fraction has hit the jackpot with Aja and Pulido, who do some of their best work bringing his scripts to life. This book is not to be missed. **C&G**



 This new collection of Winter Soldier brings to a close Ed Brubaker's days of chronicling the adventures of Bucky Barnes, which started 9 years ago. This volume reprints *Winter Soldier* #10-14, and is the conclusion to the story that Brubaker started telling with *Winter Soldier* #1. This isn't the best volume to pick up to jump into the character, as the arc is full of action that is the payoff to the set-up of the first nine issues of the book. Unlike Brubaker's last arc on Captain America, he cleans the decks here in a more thorough way than he did there, setting the character up for the next writer, as well as clearing prior attachments that could have bolted the character down. That being said, Winter Soldier was cancelled this past week, meaning that after the next trade paperback, there won't be any more Winter Soldier collections to purchase.

Brubaker's scripting here is fantastic and top-notch, as he manages to take some great twists and turns in the climactic final chapters of his Winter Soldier saga. The Black Widow has been abducted and her mind cracked, as she is reset somewhat to her more dangerous and lethal days of being a true femme fatale. In order to rescue her, Bucky must push himself harder, faster and further than ever before, even if it means unhinging himself and letting free the true Winter Soldier which lays within him. Issues #12-13 are among my favourites in the volume, as Bucky, once again in full Winter Soldier mode, goes to take out Daredevil. It's a fantastic series of sequences, as we get to see just how dangerous Winter Soldier can be when the humanity of Bucky is turned off.

For the most part I've enjoyed Butch Guice's art on Winter Soldier, but somehow his artwork has really improved in this volume. This is some of Butch Guice's best-looking artwork, as the artistry is ticked up a few

Brubaker's scripting here is fantastic and top-notch, as he manages to take some great twists and turns in the climactic final chapters of his Winter Soldier saga.

notches. The action is well-illustrated, the dark, moody atmosphere is perfectly illustrated, and the beauty of Black Widow is well represented. Often some artists make Black Widow look too overtly sexy, whereas here she looks like she would truly command a room with how she holds herself. At times Guice's take on Black Widow reminded me a bit of Jim Steranko, especially with how the hair is at times rendered.

I'm sad to see Ed Brubaker leave Winter Soldier (and take Butch Guice with him), but at the same time, I think it was the right time to go. I've been enjoying his run on Winter Soldier, but he went out on a high note, and he went before the character got stale. This was an entertaining and enjoyable read, a fitting end for Ed Brubaker. Without him, we wouldn't have Winter Soldier at all, nor would the upcoming *Captain America: Winter Soldier* film have inspiration for its story. Recommended! 

LETTERS TO C&G

Send your letters to Letters@CGMagazine.ca to have them answered by our editorial staff.

Are we ready for next gen consoles? What do you think of the current rumours for the PS4 and Xbox 720?

- Juan Sanchez

We're as ready as we're ever going to be. This is the longest console generation that consumers have ever experienced and there's a definite sense of restlessness in the air for something new, especially considering how long in the tooth the hardware itself has become in the last seven years. As far as rumours go though, there's little to debate with the PS4 since the official specs were released in February, the wild card is the next Xbox, which is unlikely to require an always online connection for single player games, but may very well be the all-in-one living room box Microsoft has always dreamed of. After all, why have a disc based movie player, a game machine, and a set top box for TV programming all hooked up when you could have one device that does it all?

Sony Just came out and said that they need to promote the vita better, which I believe is true, my question is what idea's would you have to make it more marketable?

- Chun Lau

The Vita is a great piece of hardware that a lot of people at CGM love and own, but it has problems. The price point is still a barrier, something that Sony needs to address, and the lack of a big library of must have games is another. *Gravity Rush* is one of the best original games on the system, but the rest are ports like *Metal Gear Solid HD Collection* and *Persona 4 Golden*. Sony also needs to seriously look at the price of peripherals like the expensive proprietary memory cards. All of these are big challenges that Vita needs to face before it starts selling the way it deserves to.

I would like to respond to the "Drawing to a Close" feature in your February/March issue. This article brought up an interesting topic worth of discussion:

Gaming history is paved with endless remains of hideous videogame covers. Japanese covers, specifically, have been butchered time and time again by the cruel hand of American editorial department, ever since the SNES days. However, even with crap covers many games sold well, and reached critical acclaim (*Final Fantasy III*, *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*).

The question becomes: is bad art bad for sales?

Not really, especially since lots of (AAA) titles tend to have large advertorial budgets that build hype long before the physical copy lands on the store shelves. The most effective way of using original art is to build a brand following. You can't blame the creators of *God of War* for only wanting to show Kratos on their cover - the demigod is an easily recognizable symbol, (sadly) more so than the Geek myths.

Commercial art needs to serve commerce, it's a fact. To that end, there's nothing wrong with artwork flowing into the backdrop, and letting the "boxed quotes" speak to the consumer. Think of it as achievements or bragging rights. And if an indie game was ever to become as recognizable a brand as Batman or Kratos, its box would surely proclaim loudly "The most brilliant of games, an instant 10 out of 10, a timeless classic."

While I truly appreciate memorable box art, the dawn of mobile/downloadable gaming will put a swift end to any/all cover art. On the plus, all those nostalgic games adorned with masterful and caring artwork will be worth much more in the eyes of collectors.

Keep up the excellent work C&G staff!

- Thomas

Having grown up in an era when the Atari 2600 had some of the most imaginative and quality box art around, I'm a little sad to see the "eyes up, chin down, gun ready" cookie cutter artwork that passes for modern covers. But you're right, for the hardcore gamer that does their research, or the number cruncher that's only looking for Metacritic scores and box quotes, striking covers are irrelevant. Like books and relationships, it's what inside that counts. But it would still be nice to see some care go into the packaging aspect of physical media as we enter its twilight for games. **C&G**



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